

GRAND OPERA

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

GRAND HOTEL
RESULTS OF AN ACCIDENT
SECRET SENTENCE
HELENE
MARTIN'S SUMMER
FALLING STAR
MEN NEVER KNOW
CAREER
A TALE FROM BALI
NANKING ROAD
CENTRAL STORES
THE SHIP AND THE SHORE

VICKI BAUM

GRAND OPERA

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DE 33

"GOOD evening, Madame Lanik. Glad you are back."
"Good evening, good evening, my dear. How are you?"

"*Küss die Hand, Gnae' Frau.*"

"*Grüß Gott, grüß Gott, mein Lieber. Was machen die Kinder?*"

"*Buona sera, Signora?*"

"*Grazie. Come sta?*"

"*Bon soir, Madame.*"

"*Bon soir, bon soir, ma chère. Ça va bien?*"

On a wave of polyglot friendliness and benevolence Madame Kati Lanik sailed through the stage door of the Metropolitan Opera, past the porter's desk, past the switch-board and its glum-faced operator, upstairs and across the stage. She trailed her strong perfume through the stale air of that venerable building, smiling in happy anticipation as she stopped for a second, all warmth and cheerfulness, before she burst into her dressing-room. The Metropolitan, like all opera houses of the world, was primly divided into a Ladies' Side and a Gentlemen's Side. Between these two realms gaped the huge stage, dimly lit, grey and, as yet, completely void of enchantment.

Madame never simply walked into a room; she had to "make an entrance." So she halted for another second on the threshold of the door which she had flung open, her arms outstretched, her palms turned upwards, her weight carefully balanced on the right foot.

"Darling! At last!" she cried, with an emotion that was certainly exaggerated; then she flung off hat, coat, gloves, the parcel she had been carrying and the handbag that had got into her way, to embrace and kiss Semper, the dresser.

Semper was a middle-aged, vague and vacant-looking female of great efficiency and sour disposition. Semper never quite knew whether she should feel proud or annoyed by the fact that Madame required her services instead of bringing her own dresser along like other stars. Madame, on her part, could not bear to travel with a vigilant and snooping personal maid and disliked to be fussed about. She was sincerely happy to see Semper again. Semper pressed her lips into a hundred little wrinkles, pulled the corners of her mouth down, which was her way of smiling, and began to gather Madame's things from the floor.

"We sure are glad you are here on time," she said, "everybody was in a jitter. There is to be a short rehearsal at seven."

"The boat was late, my darling. Twenty hours late, just imagine, twenty full hours. We had icebergs on our way, and I had a fight with the custom people, too, as usual. You know the fuss they make about those trunks with costumes—you'd think they would know me by now, but no; for twenty years I am coming to the States with my costumes and there is the same palaver every time. But here I am, straight from the pier, how do you call it, ready and streaming to go."

Madame spoke many languages—she herself did not quite know how many—but not a single one correctly. Even her mother tongue, Czech, had been submerged in the erratic and cosmopolitan course of her life and only cropped up occasionally in some funny and distorted words. She scrutinized herself in the mirror and smoothed back her hair, which stood up in countless ringlets the moment she took her hands off again. Madame's hair was silky like a baby's and of a strange, almost pinkish, blonde. "Looks bleached," she said with a prim air of reproach in her voice. It was, in fact; but never, never would Madame have admitted it. She turned and looked round the small and dismal room, which was smothered under arrangements of flowers.

"Smells like my own funeral," she said, beaming all over. "Take them away. Wait, 'phone for a messenger boy and send them to some hospital. *Die armen Teufel!*—they like flowers."

While Semper attended to this, Madame happily peeled off the paper from her parcel and produced a brown bottle of sinister aspect. "Look what I brought for you," she said, "it's supposed to be wonderful, I got it in Stockholm, it's an old Swedish remedy. See, I thought of you, even in Stockholm; so now no more rheumatism for you, *hein?* Please, don't thank me, it's really nothing—just the thought."

Semper accepted the gift with scant enthusiasm. Madame's world-embracing kindness was well known, and you really couldn't help liking Madame, even if Semper's trouble was not rheumatism but something to do with her ears; obviously Madame had got her mixed up with the dresser in San Francisco. Things had a tendency to get muddled in Madame's mind—and no wonder. All the people she knew, all the places she went! This, combined with the restless desire of her big heart to spread joy wherever she might be, caused things to get entangled and confused; but never mind that. She was as fine a specimen as you could wish, standing there in front of the mirror, tall and strong, with a firm and healthy slenderness, which needed neither diets nor massage, her broad, white teeth gleamed as she laughed, the pink flame of her rebellious hair dancing over her white forehead. Age? Come on, Age! Madame was not afraid of it, not as long as her voice remained young. Wrinkles? Yes, hundreds of them, fine, tiny wrinkles everywhere in the smooth skin of her face. But there was something extraordinary about these wrinkles in Madame's face: they all swept upwards, up and up, without a single drooping line, so that these wrinkles did more to lift her face than any cosmetic abracadabra could have done.

While Madame read the letters and telegrams she had

picked up at the desk, smiling, humming, snapping her fingers, tearing up some of the messages, sticking others on to the mirror, things had begun to happen. The flowers were carried out and the trunks brought in; old, massive, much-travelled trunks without any trace of elegance. Semper had put an electric pot to work, to brew some coffee, and from nowhere appeared two raw eggs, in the company of some shrivelled prunes. (Nothing better for your voice, my dear.) "Good girl——" Madame said absentmindedly, still reading, while she began to munch the prunes. "Where are the keys?" Semper asked for the third time.

"What do you want? Why are you so fidgety? The keys? What keys? I have no keys! What? Keys for the trunks? Well, where are they?" Madame said nervously, searching her bag. Suddenly she burst out laughing, "*Boje mooy*, what keys do you want? My trunks are not closed, never, don't you know that? No, my things don't get stolen, not more than other people's things. Real thieves always have keys anyway and what good is it to lock your trunks for people who don't want to steal? So, you see, why bother? You must trust people—then they don't steal from you!"

She plunged her arms into the trunk the moment it was opened and brought them back, loaded with shawls and silk and the white-gold embroidered bolero for the last act. Madame loved the feel of things and their colours. She loved good food and love and men and children and people, she loved flowers, wines and animals, she loved everything that you could touch and taste and see and smell. But most of all, and with a different, serious and almost wistful love, she loved her own voice and what she could do with it.

Suddenly she got frantic. "Where is Petrushka?" she cried. "Have they forgotten Petrushka, those idiots in Prague?—I can't sing without Petrushka, I have to cancel the performance, where are you, Petrushka, *panenko moye*?"

Then she gave a little squeal as she fished Petrushka out of the trunk. Petrushka was an old and melancholy wooden doll with a chipped chin and one eye missing. Just as Madame made him comfortable, propping his back against the mirror, there was a knock at the door. "Who?" she sang out. "Pierre——" a pleasant, high voice answered. "*Entrez, entrez donc, chéri,*" Madame called enthusiastically, opening the door and flinging herself into the visitor's arms. Pierre Colin kissed her carefully and very slightly on both cheeks; then they parted and looked at each other, kissed again and told each other how well they looked and how happy they were to see each other. And then, when the flurry of French had subsided, Pierre Colin reminded Madame that she was expected for a brief rehearsal before the performance. Her face changed at once. "What do I need a rehearsal for?" she asked, getting ready to make a scene.

"*You* don't need it—it's for the others," Pierre Colin explained patiently and tactfully. It was a phrase he had used a million times in his life as a conductor. "I've missed you very much in the morning rehearsal," he added. She smiled at him sideways. "Did you really miss me, *cheri*?" she asked and made her voice a bit husky, before she embarked again on explanations about icebergs and her delayed arrival.

While she talked on she studied Colin's face. "He's getting grey," she thought with a slight twinge of pity and tenderness. "She's getting old," thought Colin, watching her face in the mirrors which adorned every spare inch of the walls. As it happened, they had been married to each other, but that had been long ago and only for a short time. It had ended in ugly scenes and hatred, then turned into a tepid friendship and finally to a steady and reliable mutual admiration, not unmingled with pity and a certain mocking tenderness.

"*En avant*, we must work," Colin commanded. "We have beginners in the cast."

"Beginners!" Madame cried in disgust. "Young people,

with wooden arms and legs who bungle each cue and miss their exits? What is this theatre—a dramatic school, a conservatoire? Or is it still the Met.? Beginners, indeed. Did you hear, Petrushka?"

"Better beginners than have-beens," Colin said, propelling her through the door. "You—dictator——" she answered. Suddenly she felt so sorry for him that she flung her arms around his neck and gave him a kiss that was all her own, an ever so slight and gliding caress on his eyelids and eyelashes.

Pierre Colin's face was one of the few that are known all over the world. It was to be seen on a thousand posters, in a thousand programmes, on the covers of compositions dedicated to him, in countless newspapers where everything he did was faithfully reported. It was a sensitive face, with a wide forehead, and a fastidious mouth, all its energy concentrated in the burning eyes under their heavy brows. His hands were long-fingered and expressive, his shoulders wide and loose, his waist and hips narrow and he carried himself very erect. All over the world women were in love with him, watching him enraptured when he stood in front of the orchestra, every nerve in him alive, every gesture a command or a caress. Sometimes women forgot to listen to the music, for they had so much to see. People who really knew something about music considered Pierre Colin the greatest living conductor. The musicians in the orchestras adored him in spite of his fanatical, uncompromising strictness, for when he conducted they were lifted out of their humdrum lives to the heights of real art. They ceased to be bored and badly-paid underdogs and felt themselves the proud allies of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart. Pierre Colin—that name stood for great art and great music all over the world.

When Madame felt his breath shorten under her light caress, she pushed him back. "You know, Pierre, I am afraid I am still a bit in love with you," she said, with a slow

smile as she stroked his greying hair. "*Milacbku, Pan pojebnaiy,*" she said. It was Czech and meant: "God bless you, my sweetheart."

"*Je t'adore,* Katinka," he answered. They lied, both of them; but they didn't notice it.

They crossed the stage where some frantic activity was in progress. Hugh pieces of decoration walked to and fro, carried by tiny, ant-like men, invisible beneath their load of painted cardboard splendour. Madame shut her lips tightly to protect her precious throat against the dust. There was shouting, hammering, calling, commanding from all sides. A few men in white coats, looking like doctors but really only the technical staff, stood with their backs to the closed curtain and watched the puzzle of the set being pieced together. There had been a *matinée* that afternoon and the building of the 'Carmen' set was a last-minute job. A wide, sweeping stair began to grow on the left side of the stage, while at the right a white and yellow wall seemed to indicate the cigarette factory of Seville.

Madame stopped abruptly.

"What does this mean? The stair on the left? Are they crazy?" she said, and opened her mouth wide, dust or no dust. Colin grinned a bit. "It's the new stage director, Doctor Mayer. You know the sort—a young German, very arty. It's an experiment, can't you see," he said contemptuously. He was in eternal conflict with the men who staged operas; they had a nasty, obstinate, unhelpful way of posting the singers so that they couldn't see the conductor's signs. They cluttered up the stage and built sets with no acoustics. They did everything in their power to ruin the only thing that counted: the music, the sweeping flow and union of orchestra and voices. Madame tried a few steps on these stairs. They were still wobbly, because the stage screws which held them loosely together had not yet been fastened. "What do I care?" she said laughingly. "Stair on the left—

stair on the right—I've done it all. Carmen in green, blue and red, Carmen old-fashioned, Carmen modernistic, it's all the same. It's still good old Carmen."

Pierre looked impatiently at his watch. "I'm coming," she sang out and hurried on. Just as they left the stage on their way to the rehearsal room on the roof, where an impatient group of beginners was awaiting them, a man in blue overalls took off his cap and greeted Madame with a confidential smile. She recognized him at once, yet she had forgotten his name, if she had ever known it. He was one of the prop. men, and she was godmother to one of his children. "Hello," she said, without stopping on her way. "How's our little boy? I've brought something for him."

"Thanks—not so——" Joe Forest began, but she had gone on before he could finish his report. "Not so good," was what he had wanted to tell her. It was, in fact, not a little boy but a little girl and she had cried all night long; his wife believed there was something wrong with the child. Kitty was her name and she was almost two years old. He put his cap on again, slowly and deep in thought. You couldn't expect Madame Kati Lanik to keep all those details in mind, could you? After all, she must have had dozens of godchildren all over the world. He wondered what she would give baby this time. Maybe twenty dollars like last season. Twenty dollars would come in handy just now. His younger brother had been out of work for a long time and had come to stay with them. Twenty dollars would be fine. "Joe, there's a telephone call for you," someone called. Joe felt his knees grow weak. Something's the matter with the kid, he thought in a panic as he ran off to the telephone.

When Robert Marsh left the rehearsal stage to go to his dressing-room, he ran into Sybil Olivier. "Hello," she said and stopped. He wanted to pass by, he felt so utterly miser-

able, but now he had to stop too. "Hello," he said. He was in his costume but still without makeup and coat. Somehow he had got a grey spot of cigarette ash on his tight white uniform breeches, which he kept on rubbing while he tried not to see how blue Sybil's eyes were, how pretty her face and how utterly desirable her whole sweet and utterly unapproachable person.

"Tell me, how was the rehearsal?" she asked eagerly.

"Awful, simply awful, I can't tell you how awful," he said. "My throat still feels as if I had swallowed a bucketful of that terrible soft coal we have at home——"

"St. Louis nightmare," she said. "Come on, tell me. How is Kati Lanik? Is she wonderful?"

"Well, I guess, she is okay—as prima donnas go," he said. "But she certainly did everything possible to upset me, the old trout!"

Sybil laughed softly; she was rather pleased with his disgust. Suddenly he held her hand in his, he didn't quite know whether he had grabbed it or whether she had put it there. "You got to promise me one thing, Bunny," he said urgently, "promise me that you'll never become a prima donna with a capital P."

Her gay, blue eyes, slightly veiled to-night, took in his whole unhappy and dishevelled appearance. With Don José's flashy white uniform breeches he wore for the time being an old shabby tennis shirt. His dark hair was tousled and perspiration trickled down his temples. The grey spot on the white pants wouldn't yield to his rubbing. "And you, Big Boy," she said, "don't you drink too many malted milks while I'm gone and don't you dare to get fat. You might become as famous as Caruso—but if you get as fat as he was, I'll scratch your eyes out."

This said, they just stood there and looked at each other. "Funny," he said, when the silence became too long and too heavy with unspoken words.

"What's funny?" she asked.

"Funny, that the first time we sing together should be the last time too," he said, and he was terribly sorry for himself.

"Nonsense," she said resolutely. "We'll meet again and again; singers always do. That is, if we both make a career," she answered meekly. He looked at her and said nothing as he thought bitterly: "You will make your career all right and that's all that counts with you. Old Hamface will look to it, or why else would you marry him. Okay, go ahead, what do I care——?"

"So the bridal suite of the *Normandie* is waiting for you and the captain is going to marry you off—what a wonderful ceremony and so romantic and such good publicity, isn't it? The evening papers are fairly screaming with it," he said. He couldn't have suppressed it to save his life.

"Don't," whispered Sybil. "Don't." It sounded as if he had hit her with a club.

And now tears appeared in her eyes and came rolling down her cheeks. Robert, not very experienced with girls, stared at the spectacle with dismay and a painful sensation in the pit of his stomach.

"Darling—Bunny—what's the matter?" he whispered, and this time he found her face cupped in his hands and her tears streaming over his fingers.

"Nothing's the matter," she said, sniffing. She was mad at herself for getting soft; she shook off his hands and stamped her foot.

"Hell," she said—"hell—I don't know what it is. Doesn't every girl feel like crying before her wedding? I know I've read something of the sort——"

Robert let his hands hang down, helpless. Never had they seemed to him so big and heavy and useless as just now. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I didn't mean to put my foot in it——"

She began drying her eyes and smiling at him again. "Come on, pull yourself together," she said. "This is your night. Think what it took you to get this far. Why, it's what every young singer dreams of—a leading part at the Met. Now don't you let me down, don't spoil your only chance by thinking silly things and nonsense. I couldn't stand it if you flopped to-night, you've got to make a success, you've got to, for my sake——"

"For your sake, Bunny?"

"Yes, for my sake—and for yours. If I thought you were going to bungle things just because I'm getting married to-night, I would—I would——"

"Yes?" Robert asked as she stopped abruptly.

"I don't know what I would do," she finished lamely. His face was terribly close to hers all of a sudden. "How's your voice to-night?" she asked quickly, to break another heavy silence.

"Well—Madame Kati Lanik told me it was too loud. She told me my *piano* was lousy—*abominable*, she called it, but what she meant was: lousy. I tell you what's the matter with us singers. When we are young we don't know anything about singing, and before we have learned the real thing our voices are gone. And that darned French frightens me; why can't they let us sing in a white man's language? *Moi, je m'en vais pour mordre la poussière*—now, tell me, does it make sense?"

Sybil clapped her hands in a somewhat too exaggerated applause. "Bravo, bravo, almost perfect, hardly any accent at all," she cajoled him. She herself was of French-Canadian stock and languages were no problem to her. "Woollie is a marvellous teacher, isn't she?" she added. "And what this evening means to her! You simply have to be good, can't you see?"

Robert could only sigh under this added burden of responsibility. For Woollie, who had discovered his voice, was the

roundfaced, bespectacled old lady who inhabited the prompter's box. There were rumours that Woollie had been a great opera star in her days, that she had been a triumphant centre on the selfsame stage where now she was an anonymous though important cog in the wheel. Her former name was forgotten. They called her "Woollie" on account of all the jumpers, sweaters, shawls and rugs which she wrapped around herself as protection against draughts in her tiny box. She was seen knitting every single minute her hands were not occupied otherwise, in giving cues, pointing at singers, softly conducting with her pencil and keeping everybody on the alert. She had coached Robert Marsh without any fee and with endless patience and great skill, and no wonder he was more afraid of Woollie to-night than of the entire rest of the world, including the audience, Pierre Colin and Madame Kati Lanik.

Sybil had rummaged through her handbag and fished out a tiny object. In fact, she had made this trip to the Gentlemen's Side for the special purpose of bringing this object to Marsh. Robert's imploring glances and his clumsy words, loaded with so much hidden meaning, did not make things any easier for her.

"Here," she said, "I've brought you a mascot. You have to wear it on your little finger and then nothing can happen to you. How's that?"

Robert stared at the small ring which she had slipped on his finger. It was a bit tight and looked like a ring a child might buy at the ten-cent store. In the centre of it there was the tiniest little heart and the whole trinket was made of old-fashioned, yellow gold. "Thanks——" he said, "that certainly should help a bit——"

"My grandmother gave it to me when I was a baby," she said. "It has brought me good luck so far. You see, what I gave you is only half of the ring. I'll keep the other half. Look!"

On her middle finger there was a ring like his; only where his had a heart, hers had two tiny hands, clasped into each other. "It's very old," said Sybil. "You see, the little heart was concealed in the two little hands and you could open them and there it was. My grandmother told me that for many generations it has always been handed down to the person dearest to one. I thought if I'd split it, we could always recognize each other, even if we wouldn't meet for many, many years, even if we would change a lot—and get old ourselves before we see each other again——"

But this was too much for her. She simply let herself drop against Robert's shoulder, and there she cried to her heart's content. A moist spot appeared on his shirt and soon it was soaked to his skin. It was like standing in a heavy spring rain which shook you to the roots. After a while he got his clumsy hands up and clasped them around her back. He felt her sobs vibrating in his fingers as you would feel a cantilena vibrate in the fine grain of a violin. "Dear Bunny, dear, dear girl—and, damn it, it's high time for my makeup——"

It was in this situation that Sasha found them, Alexander Bhakaroff, the man whom Sybil was to marry to-night. He had come down the corridor on his way to the dressing-room, and, as his eyes were not what they used to be, he had almost passed by without recognizing Sybil. He was a man in his late forties, tall and powerful and almost too good-looking. He was dressed in a wide, heavy travel coat of excellent cut and material, and he wore a soft hat and a monocle. Everything about Bhakaroff was excellent: his voice, his appearance, his manners and speech, his whole, well-groomed, well-disciplined person. Yet somehow his words were just a bit too sonorous, his movements too well rounded and his smart clothes not quite real. He gave the impression of some flamboyant Renaissance hero, Don Juan for instance, disguised in modern clothes, just for the fun of it.

"*Pardon*——" he said softly and, touching the brim of his hat, he gave Robert Marsh a man-to-man smile as he found him in the embrace of a girl. Sybil raised her face from Robert's wet but pleasant shoulder just as Bhakaroff was about to pass by. He stopped and, the fraction of a second later, he smiled.

"Oh—it is you? My dear——" he said, very gently, his voice a deep, black velvet. "Having a little cry? What a bundle of nerves we are. You must forgive her, Marsh, my boy——"

Sybil sniffed resolutely and took matters in hand. "I wanted to say good-bye to Marsh and I got soft over it," she said, swallowing a last little sob. "It's ridiculous, I know, but I can't help being like that. Too sentimental, I suppose."

"I am certain our friend will understand. You don't mind her, Marsh, *n'est-ce pas*? Alas, we all live on our nerves, don't we? But, *mon Dieu*, my boy, you are not dressed yet! Hurry, hurry—I must not detain you longer with our silly little sentiments. And you, my dear, you have to get dressed too. *Dépêche-toi*, not another minute to lose. Come. I take you to your room. And don't be worried because you cried before singing. You know what science found out just recently? It is, in fact, very good for your voice to have a little cry. It lubricates the mucus membrane of your nose, it gives you more chest resonance, the membranes swell with the moisture and the voice gains more depth——"

Thus, desperately rambling on, Bhakaroff took Sybil across the stage. But he kept to the dim realm behind the backdrop in order to hide from her the expression of his face and the anguished turmoil of his heart.

"You are a beast, you are mean and always have been," Woollie yelled at Madame, as soon as the brief and very unsatisfactory rehearsal was over and they were left alone.

"Jealous, that's what you are, jealous and an intrigante, if there ever was one——"

"*Heilige Madonna!* Hildchen, what's come over you? Hildchen, are you crazy? What have I done to you? Don't you know how I love you?" Madame cried, flabbergasted by the unexpected flood of angry German that poured upon her. But Woollie was not to be stopped; she went on, her eyes blazing behind her spectacles, her little red paws cutting the air with accusing gestures and her voice swelling with well-placed head-resonance.

"Go ahead, ruin the boy's chance, just because he is young and has more voice than you! Upset his nerves on the night of his *début*, so he will make a flop! Very noble of you, very noble indeed. Afraid he might run away with the show, are you?"

It speaks greatly for Madame's character that she listened to all this with good grace and without getting angry. Instead she watched the spectacle of the aroused prompter with a sad and yet amused sort of sympathy. She had known Woollie at a time when she was still Hildegard Blank, one of the Bayreuth stars, and she was ready to forgive her anything, anything at all. She put her arm around the fuzzy and trembling shoulder of the old woman, gave her a few friendly tugs and squeezes and finally succeeded in getting her settled on the old plush sofa which the rehearsal room provided for the comfort of exhausted singers.

"Now, Hildchen, listen: how long have we known each other? Twenty years? Twenty-five? Have I ever done anything mean to you?" she asked sensibly. Woollie began to calm down, there was only some distant grumbling as from a subsiding thunderstorm.

"If *you* have forgotten when we sang together for the first time—I haven't," she said. "It was in *Götterdämmerung*, in Gleiwitz. You sang the first Rheintochter and I had come as guest-star to sing Brunhilde——"

"*Du grosser Gott! Gleiwitz, Götterdämmerung!* You were wonderful, Hildchen, wonderful. There has never been a Brunhilde like you since, that's what I've told anybody who wants to listen. Remember—when your horse ran off with you in the last act?" Madame shot a side glance at Woollie. Yes, she had begun to smile. "So, now tell me what I have done to make you so angry, Hildchen," she begged.

"It's about the boy," Woollie said.

"What boy?"

"That boy, Bob—Robert Marsh, your Don José. Why do you hate him, why do you want to ruin him?"

"I? But why should I? He is a nice young animal, and if he could get a good teacher and study another ten years he might become a fairly good tenor."

Woollie raised her head. "*I—am his teacher,*" she said. "*Zatratsenay,*" Madame thought. It was a profane Czech version of "What a mess!"

"You, Hildchen? But that's marvellous. Congratulations. Imagine what it means to make one of those Americans sing at all. Only a master like you could have done it. And I must say he has a voice, even if he can't sing a *piano*. Well, what could you expect from an American? Maybe they'll like him—tenors are scarce," she said cajolingly.

She had grave doubts, however, about Woollie's qualifications as a singing teacher. Woollie belonged to the old Wagnerian school which believed in force and expression more than in *bel canto* and the real art of singing.

For a young voice there was nothing more dangerous than this method. "Too much glottis," Madame thought expertly. "It's good luck that the boy seems strong as an ox and can roar like an angry elephant."

"It's his *début*, and I thought you would help him a bit; instead of that you frightened him," Woollie said.

"I frightened him? Well, I'm damned," Madame replied.

"It's not the sort of reaction I'm used to from handsome young men. Tell me a bit more about him—how did he get as far as the Met.?"

She cuddled up in her corner of the old plush sofa and kicked off her shoes, ready to listen to Woollie's recital. She knew it would take some time, for Woollie had brought out her knitting and taken a deep breath, as for a dramatic recitative and aria. She glanced at her wrist watch: Twenty to eight! I'll give her ten minutes, the poor old devil, she thought.

"Well, it's a long story," Woollie began, "and if he flops to-night he will never make up for it, you know how it is. When I met him, that was in some sort of dramatic society, young people, you know, a pupil of mine sang there and then I heard this boy. He was a bank clerk at the time or not even that, an office-boy maybe, but he liked to sing. And there was this natural voice, placed quite right, you know, and he sang an A and he sang a B and he sang a B-sharp and no effort at all. So I took him in hand and we began to study, one year, two years, three years. I have patience, and I pounded patience, patience, patience, patience into his mind. He's very young still, there was no hurry, I tried to make him understand it, but these Americans, they have no time, a lot of ambition, yes, but no time. Fortunately he could keep his job; the bank where he works belongs to Mr. Carter. He is on the board of directors of the Met., so he had some understanding for the boy, especially after I had an interview with him. But do you think he would help the boy to get ahead? No, not Mr. Carter. Yes, if Bob were a pretty ballet girl, that would be different. Last year the Met. felt they needed some young blood, so they started those radio auditions, you've heard of them? You know what auditions are—I would rather be boiled in oil three times than go through one audition. There were hundreds and hundreds of people for the auditions. And then they select ten, and out of the

ten they select four who are allowed to sing on the Metropolitan Radio programme. And at the end of the season one of them is picked for a contract. Bob was the one. And then he got small parts; you know the sort of parts he would get: the messenger in *Aïda*, Ruiz in *Trovatore*. Then there came this young German stage director, Dr. Mayer, a Jew, but very nice. He liked the boy because he is young and looks nice and doesn't spoil Dr. Mayer's stage with an unseemly belly as Mallori does. There was a big row and then Dr. Mayer got what he wanted and the boy was allowed to understudy for Don José. And Dr. Mayer must have great influence with Jehovah (he is one of those German exiles, you know), and he must have prayed every day that fat, old Mallori should get the flu. So he got it. And to-night, after five years of studying and waiting and hoping and suffering agony and all that goes with a young singer's career, now he's got his one big chance. You must understand that the whole theatre is up in arms against him, especially that Italian bunch and all the maestros. And why? Just because he's an American, a simple, plain boy from St. Louis. Well, here we are! I lost twenty-four pounds, upon my soul, while I studied that part with him. And then you come along and tell him that he can't sing and that he can't act and that he roars like an angry elephant. You should have heard yourself roar that time when you sang the *Rheintochter* in *Gleiwitz*——"

Woollie had worked herself into such a state that she broke off, frightened by her own courage. After all, she was only a prompter now, whatever she might have been in days past, and Kati was still a star, although (or so Woollie thought) her voice was getting a bit threadbare too. But Kati didn't mind. She laughed, and falling all over Woollie she kissed her fuzzy, wrinkled cheeks.

"Of course, of course," she cried, "if you are his teacher we shall simply have to make it a success for him. You can

rely on me, I'll pilot him through, I'll do anything in my power to help him along. So don't worry, we'll make it a great night for you."

Before Woollie could thank her, she looked ostentatiously at her wristwatch, which in fact she hadn't let out of sight all the time, and with a little squeal she got up, kissed Woollie once more and hurried off to her dressing-room.

At seven-thirty the doors were opened and lights turned on in the house. The standing room filled quickly with people who had waited in line for hours on end. A group of nine young men took its stand right behind the orchestra boxes, noisy young men who made hard-hitting wise-cracks about the auditorium and its old-fashioned red plush splendour. They all wore buttons in their lapels as if they were members of some convention and two of them had taken the precaution to bring along bags of popcorn. These were The Boys, a deputation from the Carter Bank, where Robert Marsh had started as one of them, and where he had worked until his recent engagement with the Met. They had come as a voluntary *claque*, big-handed and reliable even if no great connoisseurs of the art of grand opera.

The house was still very empty, very big and very still. Only down in the orchestra pit, where Miss Helen Tyne was tuning her harp, a chirping plunk-plunk could be heard. Miss Tyne was a thin, faded, spinsterish creature in black velvet with vague blue eyes and scurrying white hands, of which she was very proud. She lived with her mother on a very small income, for Miss Tyne was only a substitute harpist. It was a fantastic stroke of good luck that to-night the first harpist was down with the flu and the second had got leave to play a solo in some concert, so that Miss Tyne would have to play when *He* conducted. Her tired old maid's heart fluttered in her flat bosom, filled with gratitude and jubilation.

For there had been a few weeks in her life when Pierre Colin had been in love with her. Then he had been a poor young musical assistant and she a beautiful young harpist. Angeline he had called her, and he had played the piano for her and kissed her several times and had told her all his secret dreams. He had been a genius even then, fire and flame, heaven and hell in his soul, too much hell, maybe. She had been frightened by his wild love-making and he had been hurt. His English wasn't very good and her French was even worse, and there had been some sad misunderstandings. He had left and she had stayed on. He had become the world's greatest conductor and been married three or four times, and she had remained single, a substitute harpist, at seven dollars fifty for the evening—that is since they had the new union rules. She had never spoken to him again, but she had been in many of his concerts and he belonged to her, whether he knew it or not, because she had recognised his genius long before the world did. And to-night she would play under his bâton and he would notice her and greet her with his eyes and talk to her of old times and she would be the queen of the evening. And meanwhile a string broke with a sharp report, and Miss Tyne woke up from her dreams to search in her tin box for a new string with trembling white hands, which middle age had sprayed with a pattern of liver-coloured spots.

Now a few people appeared in the upper tiers and took their seats. "Some theatre," Olga Kalish said to Mike Stern, with an admiring glance which circled around all the empty rows and returned to her boy-friend's round face. Kalish & Co. filed in behind them, complete and in full regalia. The Co. was represented by the son-in-law, Jake Popper. He gallantly clapped down the seat for his wife Cora, who had come to see the opera in spite of her delicate condition. The sounds of the harp down there chirped lonely and lost up to the second balcony. "Some stage," Olga said snug-

gling up to Mike. "Imagine, I should go with a boy who sings in the Met."

"Better go now, Mike," Mamma Kalish said, "Olga, tell him to go. He will only get himself all excited and worked up in a state."

"I? Not in my life," Mike said, but he was only bragging. "Are you all comfortable? Good. Now, as I said before, don't expect too much, it's only a small part, you understand, it takes years and years before you get to a bigger part——"

"It's taken years already," Papa Kalish remarked. He was a born pessimist and the family was afraid lest he might spoil the great evening for them. Mamma Kalish had had a hard time getting him into his dark suit with the stiff shirt and the still stiffer collar. But here he was now, looking every inch as elegant as an advertisement of Davids & Sons.

"You'll keep your fingers crossed for me?" Mike asked. And Olga crossed them right there and then. "It's the thrill of my life, Mike," she said. "Imagine, me sitting here and you standing down there and singing. You should have seen the other girls when I told them my fiancé is singing a big part at the Met."

"It's not a big part, I told you," Mike said, feeling tense and tight around the neck.

"Well, it's an officer, you are singing and you're going to wear a uniform, so it must be some part," Olga said, stubbornly clinging to her dream.

"He isn't your fiancé yet," Papa Kalish said from the background where he had been chewing over one of his grouches.

"No, don't you get him excited, Papa," Mamma Kalish said again. "And you, Mike, don't you talk too much, it's bad for the voice, better go now and put on that uniform."

"I'm feeling funny," Cora reported.

"You didn't eat enough," her husband said.

"It's the fish, maybe," Mamma suggested.

"No, it's the baby," Cora said. "I can feel it move around like mad."

"It's the fish *and* the baby *and* the excitement," Papa Kalish concluded. "I told her to stay home. But no, she *has* to go to the opera in a condition like that——"

Mike, after handing Mamma a bag of candies and shaking hands all around, took his leave, for now it was really high time to get made up. It was only a few weeks that Mike didn't have to punch the clock in the Thirty-ninth Street entrance, where the chorus singers came in; he enjoyed being just a bit late. "Keep your fingers crossed, spit into my hand," he told Olga.

"Tui, tui, tui," she said, "you are not superstitious, kid?"

"Not me, touch wood," Mike said. "You should see the others. So when the curtain goes up you look to the left side and the officer with the black moustache, that's me."

Olga tittered with pleasure at this idea and stopped only for a moment as Mike pulled her out of sight and pasted a quick kiss on her mouth; then she went on tittering, while he marched off importantly. He felt very grand, having invited the whole party to dinner and to the Metropolitan and even taken a taxi all the way from Fourteenth Street. At the same time he was disturbed by the feeling that his part was not big enough to live up to all their excitement. Zuniga was a nice part, yes, but scarcely proportionate to Papa Kalish's stiff high collar. He felt that the Kalish family had a right to expect more of him than just marrying their daughter, after all they had done for him. They had bet their money on him, so to speak, and it was up to him to win the race. They had given him food, lodging, employment and encouragement during all those years while he tenaciously worked his way up; from a little choir boy in a synagogue to a chorus singer in a musical comedy, chorus singer in an opera stock company, chorus singer at the radio—and, finally,

chorus singer at the Met. Then there had been a long and trying halt in his career. Getting out of the chorus and becoming a soloist was like storming a citadel all alone, his only weapon a deep, rich, full bass-baritone voice.

His voice was good, that much he knew. His looks were nothing to brag of, that he knew also. But then, why should a bass-baritone have to look like Gary Cooper? Doctor Mayer was always intriguing against him because he didn't like his figure. As if Caruso had been an Apollo. Mike Stern hated Doctor Mayer as only one Jew can hate another Jew. A refugee, this Doctor Mayer, the nerve he had to come to this country and make life hard for a good American like Mike. Well, we'll see what's more important in the end, voice or looks, he thought rebelliously. And under such thoughts, Mike Stern took his way towards Fortieth Street and the stage entrance, marching triumphantly through the coveted door which was reserved for soloists only.

Madame, on returning to her dressing-room, found Semper pacing up and down in front of her door like an angry sentinel. "There's a girl inside and I can't get rid of her," she reported grimly. "She wouldn't tell her name but she says you're expecting her."

Madame swept past her into the room. There she stood petrified, staring at a slim, small young girl who sat stiffly on the wicker chair in the corner.

"*Heilige Maria, Mutter Gottes*, it's you!" Madame exclaimed.

"Yes, it's I," the girl answered. Semper had posted herself behind Madame to watch the goings-on. But Madame closed the door in her face with the remark that she wouldn't be needed for another ten minutes.

"Well—Katzerl, this *is* a surprise," Madame said, much softer but not entirely appeased. "How did you get here?"

"By train," the girl said. "I would have met you at the boat but I knew you wouldn't have liked it."

"That's right; I hate being met or seen off," Madame said absently while she took stock of her daughter's entire appearance. "She looks abominable," she thought, using her favourite word. "That coat, that hat, those shoes—abominable." "Did you tell downstairs who you are?" she asked, getting angry again.

"Don't worry, I didn't. I don't give you away," the girl said with great bitterness. She hated her mother for looking young and beautiful and adventurous, and for having tucked her daughter away all her life. And most of all she hated her because she felt herself to be grey and colourless compared with this flamboyant mother of hers.

"How is it they've let you pass?" Madame asked. The rules against backstage visitors were rather strict at the Met.

"I managed—like the camel that can pass through the eye of a needle," Katzerl replied; which brought a little smile to Madame's face. It sounded brighter than she estimated Katzerl to be. "You didn't have to rush to New York. I would have visited you immediately after the San Francisco season anyway," she said tentatively.

"Then it might have been too late," her daughter answered gloomily. Madame shot a haunted glance at her wristwatch, for it was high time for her to get dressed. She felt extremely uncomfortable, even more so than usual, in her daughter's presence. It so happened that Katzerl was about the only human being who did not seem to like her, who did not think that she was nice and kind and big-hearted, the only human being who didn't fall for her charm but seemed repelled by it. "Do you have a ticket, or shall I try and get one for you?" she asked. "The house is sold out, but——"

"Thanks," Katzerl said. "I don't care for Grand Opera, as you know. I won't stay for the performance."

"Well, well," Madame thought, "that's nothing to be so

proud of." She was very nervous by now. She cast another furtive glance at her wristwatch: Five to eight. "*Jeshib-mareea*," she thought and began to undress. "Excuse me," she said, placing herself in front of the mirror and turning on all the lights, "I have to make up now."

"Never mind me," Katzerl said in her infuriating manner of constantly being hurt and humiliated. She watched her mother's flesh burst forth from her dropping dress and it disgusted her.

"Where's Valentino?" Madame asked, fiercely searching the room. Valentino was the name she had given to a garment of special history and magic. It was the wrapper she always put on while she made up for the stage. It had served her almost since the beginning of her career. It was a real Poiret and as outmoded as this name itself, a floating and flouncing affair, copper brown satin printed over and over with the smiling head of a pretty beturbaned Indian prince. It was a shameless horror of bad taste, and Madame loved it with tender irony. She had received it as a present from one of the first men in her life, a young Austrian officer in Troppau. Incidentally, he had not only given her Valentino, but had also become Katzerl's father. Madame had only a hazy remembrance of him. A frightened young fellow on leave, worn down by typhoid fever and a shot in the shoulder, yet terribly hungry to snatch a bit of life before he went to the front again. Romance, courtship, marriage and separation—all of it had lasted not more than a week. He had never returned from the war and all that was left was the baby, Valentino, and a romantic little halo of war-widowship. If Katzerl would choose to do so, she was well entitled to call herself Countess Senta Budwitz; but this was not in Katzerl's line. Slipping into Valentino's vast sleeves, Madame looked her daughter over once more. Abominable. She felt better, though, as soon as the well-worn silk enwrapped her with the hundredfold smile of the Indian prince. She put a soiled

band over her hair, pulling it back from her forehead, and began splashing handfuls of cold cream on her face. Her daughter watched her in silence.

While Madame swiftly handled the sticks of grease paint, covering her own blonde skin with the olive shade of Carmen, she wondered what Katzerl's surprising visit might mean.

"Money?" she asked, deep in thought.

"I beg your pardon?" Katzerl asked back.

"I mean, do you need money? Or did you just come to see me? I mean is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes," Katzerl said.

"What—yes?" Madame asked.

"Yes, I need you," her daughter said. At once Madame was at her side. "Well, that's better," she said happily. "Katzerl needs me and here I am, ready to do anything for her. What is it? Tell me all your troubles."

She tried to caress Katzerl's hair and face, but her hands were greasy and had that peculiar smell of synthetic vanilla that goes with theatrical make-up. Katzerl imperceptibly drew away from her mother's touch. Then she buried her face in her own hands and there were two short and tearless sobs. They sounded like a dry cough, and they moved and embarrassed Madame to an almost unbearable degree.

"Now, now——" she said, her unwanted hands suspended in mid-air. "You mustn't cry, you really mustn't. Look here, Petrushka," she said, looking for assistance. "Look who's here. Look who's crying. Come, say hello to Petrushka, Katzerl."

But Katzerl pushed the doll aside as she had always pushed toys and presents away, even as a baby, Madame remembered. There came two more of those coughing sobs from behind Katzerl's hands. Madame pretended to be engrossed in the business of slipping into her Gypsy skirt and shirt; but not before she had put on the black wig had Katzerl regained control of herself.

"I'm going to have a baby," she said from behind her hands. Madame stood still for a second, the Spanish comb poised in her fingers. "Steady now," she thought, "steady." She swallowed hard before she went over and knelt down by the wicker chair and the mouse-grey bundle of misery that was her daughter. She would have loved to take Katzerl in her arms, kiss her, caress her, let her cry and then dry her tears. But as Katzerl did not seem to like being touched, Madame, with great restraint, kept her hands to herself.

"You don't have to—if you don't want to——" she whispered close to Katzerl's ear.

"But I want to have it, I want it——" she said, with unexpected violence and her face came out from behind her hands, white with rage.

"But then—that's wonderful, Katzerl," Madame said waveringly. "Think, a little baby—a grandchild for me: it's wonderful, really. Don't you worry now—we'll be so happy with that baby, so happy——"

"No, we won't," said Katzerl. "You won't be happy, you won't like it, you will hate it as you have hated me. Don't lie to me, don't lie to yourself. You don't want a grandchild, you don't want to be a grandmother, you didn't even want to be a mother, you have hidden me in convents and Swiss Pensions, because you were ashamed of me and when my baby is born I will not allow you to see it, can you hear me? I won't let you see it or touch it or talk to it, it will be *my* baby and not yours——"

Katzerl's outbursts were all the more painful because of her restraint. She didn't cry, she didn't yell, she whispered bitter and senseless words, her lips turned white and the knuckles of her fists too, but she didn't let herself go. Madame felt sorry and helpless at the same time. While Katzerl went on whispering bitter and poisonous things, Madame returned to her mirror to fasten red flowers into her hair and big Gypsy earrings into her ears. What annoyed her most was

Katzerl's flawless, slightly affected Harvard accent which put even more distance between them.

"Katzerl——" she said, "*aber Katzerl, aber Katzerl*," stop the nonsense—*aber Katzerl*——"

A knock at the door interrupted them; inconsiderate and much too loud: First Call. Madame's nerves grew taut like the ropes of a departing ship.

"Who's the father? Do you love him? Let me talk to him, he'll have to marry you, I'll take care of that," she said, all strength and energy.

"But I *am* married. Do you think I would have a baby if I were not married?" Katzerl said primly.

"No, you wouldn't," Madame thought. It was almost a reproach.

"I wrote you everything about it," Katzerl went on.

"You don't need to tell me that you forget all about my letter?"

For a panicky second Madame searched her confused memory. "I never received your letter," she said then. "Where did you send it?"

"To Rio de Janeiro. In November," Katzerl said.

"Well, I never got it, and that's that," Madame said. She had a faint idea that the letter might have been lost among the dozens of envelopes which she threw away unopened. She made a shy attempt to get hold of Katzerl's hand and this time Katzerl permitted it. Madame sighed. This was better; she needed the touch, the contact from skin to skin, or she felt entirely lost. "Now tell me all about it," she said. And Katzerl, in her dry and cramped, defensive way, told her all about it.

Katzerl was in her junior year, studying the history of art at Harvard; it appeared that at some party in Boston she had met a young architect, Cyril Durham, and, as far as Madame could make out, had been swept off her feet, been completely carried away by his wonderful personality. From her arid

and reserved descriptions Madame also concluded that Cyril seemed a handsome rascal and an ardent lover who had easily persuaded her to go with him to the register office and become his wife. They had been married for four months and the baby was in about its ninth week. The first two months had been paradise and the rest pure, undiluted hell. It took Madame some time to probe into Katzerl's marital troubles, because when they came down to the point, Katzerl was reluctant to give details. There were no financial difficulties, as Cyril came from a well-to-do family and had some money of his own. He also seemed to be successful and doing well as an architect. But there were many pretty and easy-going young women having endless conferences with him, smoking his cigarettes, drinking his whisky and treating him like a pet dog. There was a dreadful, indispensable, much too intimate, common, redheaded secretary. There were—the curse of our times—spots of lipstick on his handkerchiefs. There were Saturday evenings at the country club, when Cyril got tipsy and danced an exhibitionistic Rumba all by himself on the floor. ("He sounds great fun," Madame thought.) There were nights when he didn't come home at all, and mornings when he had a hangover and treated Katzerl rudely at breakfast. There was the couch in his studio where he had taken to sleep when he came home late, without as much as saying good-night to her. There were three horrid days and nights when he had simply disappeared, she didn't know where, she didn't know with whom. And now there was collapse, cataclysm, the end of the world: Cyril had left her and gone to New York for good. "He sent me a month's allowance—through his lawyer," Katzerl said, and stared at her mother with the eyes of a wounded fawn. "I think he doesn't love me any more——"

("But she has beautiful eyes," Madame thought, in the midst of all this misery.)

"If he doesn't love you any more, why don't you give

him up?" she asked; for never, never in her life had she committed the sin of hanging on to a dying love affair.

"But I love him, he is my husband, he belongs to me, I'd rather kill myself than give him up," Katzerl said obstinately. Madame nodded sadly. She knew the words, she knew the voice. It was the eternal talk of the wedded wife, handed down from woman to woman, ever since Eve had made her first scene with Adam. As for Madame, she had always been The Other Woman, even during her short flings at matrimony.

She went over to her daughter and knelt down beside her. "Look here, Katzerl," she said gently, "don't you remember '*Rosenkavalier*'?"

*Mit leichten Herzen und leichten Händen
Halten und nehmen, halten und lassen.
Die nicht so sind, die straft das Leben
Und Gott erbärmt sich ihrer nicht,"*

she sang softly into the young woman's ear.

"You don't understand. This is not an opera. This is life. I am married to Cyril, I am going to have a baby and I am not going to let him be dragged away by some low, scheming little bitch," Katzerl said; and the common word was so unexpected that it gave Madame a little jolt.

"Well, and what do you want *me* to do about it," she said somewhat exasperated.

"Talk to him, tell him that I love him, bring him back to me. You have experience with men, you know how to treat them," Katzerl said, and it sounded less like a plea than an insult. Madame began pacing up and down the small room. Every time she passed the dressing-table she cast a hurried glance at her wristwatch. It ticked and ticked, the time went by, only ten more minutes before the curtain went up. She should have stayed alone now, to relax, concentrate, save her voice, save her nerves, save her energy for Carmen, instead of being troubled with the platitudinous difficulties

of this child of hers. She stepped in front of Katzerl. "Look here," she said, "I have not much time just now. You'll have to go soon. Can't we talk it over when I return from San Francisco? Maybe by then everything will have straightened itself out, anyway."

Katzerl got up at once and gathered together her colourless accessories. "I am sorry I disturbed you," she said. "Of course, Carmen is so much more important than my happiness. Grease-paint has always been more to you than blood. Well—you will never see me again."

It was not the first time in her life that Madame had been blackmailed by the threat of suicide, but the first time that such a thing had come from her own daughter.

"Wait, wait——" she said hastily. "I'll do anything I can for you and you know it. But ten minutes before the curtain goes up is a bad moment for decisions about life and death."

"Shall I meet you after the performance, then?" Katzerl asked, willing to let herself be persuaded back to life.

"Nnnno—not after the performance," Madame said in embarrassment. "You know how it is, an official reception, banquet, publicity, the board of directors and all that. No, not to-night——"

"After the banquet?"

"I'll be dead then, totally unable to think another thought or to speak another word," Madame said, trying to evade the issue. She was lying just a little bit; after the theatre she expected a telephone call from Antony, a wonderful man she had met on the boat——

"To-morrow, then. Shall I come to your hotel? We could go from there and see Cyril together," Katzerl said obstinately. It was a horrible idea and Madame was glad to have a real excuse for the morning. "Child," she said softly, "to-morrow morning I have to take the first plane for San Francisco. I am missing one rehearsal already—Salome. You never seem to realize that I am a hard-working woman."

"Well—then," Katzerl said slowly; "that's that." Madame threw another glance at her white and desperate face and said quickly: "Where can I find this husband of yours? I'll talk to him to-night—if you will promise to take the next train to Boston and sleep quietly in your own, comfortable bed. Maybe I could even pack him up to-night and send him back to you." She rummaged through her bag and produced two white pills. "Take these to-night, you need sleep. To-morrow, I promise, your Cyril will bring you your breakfast to your bed. How's that?"

Just because it was seven minutes before the curtain, Madame felt this crazy strength in herself to get rid of her daughter now and later to fulfil all the enormous promises she was making. She saw with pleasure that Katzerl began to smile at the thought of Cyril bringing breakfast to her bed. It was a little sunrise all of its own in her small, cramped face, and for a fleeting second Madame understood that a man might fall in love with those big, sad eyes and this shy and rare sort of a smile. Katzerl, for her part—and her hatred of her mother was nothing but love turned stale and rancid—had unlimited faith in Kati Lanik's power to make any man do what she wanted. She began to scribble her own address and all the telephone numbers where Cyril might possibly be found at this time of the evening. Madame permitted herself to breathe a bit easier. Second Call. I still have twenty minutes' time till my first cue, she thought in a panic.

"When you talk to Cyril—he doesn't know you are my mother," Katzerl said, while Madame buttoned her into her coat, as if she were still a little child. She stopped, surprised.

"He doesn't?" she said, baffled.

"No, certainly not. Don't you know that I am discreet?" Katzerl answered with an unexpected spark of charm. "Child, if I could only teach you, child," Madame thought, as so often before. She wondered whether she might venture to kiss

this poor, reluctant little face, but drew back instinctively as there was a knock at the door.

"No!" Madame sang out.

The door opened and admitted a gentleman in a faultless evening suit. "It's only me——" he said. "Do I disturb you?"

"Never, Peter, you? Never," Madame said impulsively. "This is Mr. Peter Johnson, I think I told you about him. This is my dear young friend—Mrs. Durham——" she made the introduction. There was an awkward little pause and then Katzerl said tactfully: "Well, good-night then. And thanks——"

"Good-night, good-night," Madame said eagerly. "Don't forget to take the pills. Take good care of yourself. I'll 'phone you early to-morrow morning before I fly to San Francisco."

"Thank God, she's gone," Madame said, and let herself fall into the wicker chair as soon as the door closed behind Katzerl's slender back. Semper had slipped into the room behind Mr. Johnson and began at once to do things to Madame's hair, to slip Carmen's high-heeled shoes onto her feet—up to now Madame had padded around barefooted as was her habit—and to tidy up the dressing-table.

"Let me look at you, Peter," Madame said, extending both her hands in a broad gesture of welcome, palms up so that Johnson could place a kiss in each of them. He was a neat, middle-aged man, agreeably bald-headed, with a well-modelled, clean skull. "You look just a bit tired, Peter?" she asked, after scrutinizing his face for a moment. "To treat men right is a cinch," she thought colloquially. Pierre wanted to hear that he looked fresh and young. Peter, on the other hand, was pleased when he could complain. Times were against him, he hated the government, he *wanted* to look tired.

"Is it so bad, really?" she said consolingly, trying to concentrate on Peter's troubles and at the same time handing

the sheet with Katzerl's scribbling to Semper. "Excuse me for a moment," she said to Peter. "Call up every one of these numbers until you get Mr. Durham on the 'phone; Mr. Cyril Durham from Boston," she said to Semper and then she stole a short glance at her score which lay opened on the dressing-table. '*Je ne pars pas, je ne pars pas*——' it was the spot where she usually got stuck. She forgot Semper, Durham and her visitor and there was a long, abstracted silence, during which she got herself completely lost in the score. Peter Johnson sat motionless and full of respect, looking at the reflection in the patent leather of his opera shoes.

"Mr. Durham on the 'phone, Madame," Semper reported, as she came trotting back into the room. Conversations with or from the Met. were no easy matter, as this venerable institution had not yet admitted the newfangled luxury of telephone receivers in the stars' dressing-rooms, but in general relied on sending a boy with a message. Madame clutched her costume around her and sailed down the corridor to a corner with its heavy wall telephone, all the time softly cursing that smelly old stable which was the paramount goal of every ambitious singer in the world.

"Hello," she said with her most velvety voice, "I don't know whether you've ever heard my name, I am Kati Lanik, the singer—yes, in person, yes, yes. Oh, thank you so much, really? In what did you hear me last? In *Tosca*, last season? How nice of you to tell me all these things, I am blushing, really. No, no, the reason for my calling you is that I am a friend of Katzerl. Of whom? No, I mean Senta, your wife, you know. Who? Goopy? Is that what you call her? A tiny little fish in a big aquarium, how charming, yes, and very appropriate. She is such a dear little thing, isn't she? Has she complained about you? But my dear Cyril, you ought to know that Senta is much too discreet for such a thing. Yes, I would so like to meet you, it seems imperative, im-per-a-tive-yes. The trouble is that I am leaving for San

Francisco to-morrow morning. To-night after the performance? So sorry, but I'm all dated up to-night. Couldn't you see me during the performance, here, in the Met.? You could? Well, that's splendid, any time, any time, my dear Cyril. I'll leave word at the stage door that they should take you to my dressing-room whenever you arrive—not too late, please, we'll have a lot to talk over. *Au revoir*, then, I am terribly excited about meeting you so soon. No, not at all, you sound very, very nice and we'll be good friends, I am sure. *Au revoir*, then, *à bientôt*."

She was humming gaily as she returned to her dressing-room. "I still can make men do whatever I want," she thought, pleased with herself.

Five minutes before the overture the house slowly began to fill up. This magnificent and stuffy auditorium which always looked as if it were never dusted, although an army of charwomen descended upon it every morning, now came to life, with all the lights turned on, with the whisperings and muffled chatter of the arriving audience, with nodding, greetings and smilings from seat to seat, with ermine and emeralds in the boxes, with last year's evening dresses and discreet necklaces of seed pearls on the second balcony and with fancy jewellery from Woolworth's in the gallery.

Old Mrs. Johnson never came too late. "How are you to-night, Sloane?" she asked the old usher who pushed the chair back for her. "Thanks, I couldn't be better, Mrs. Johnson," he answered, as he had answered for twenty years. He made sure that Mrs. Johnson was comfortable and left the box with the indication of a bow.

Mrs. Johnson, sitting very upright, took her opera glasses and scanned the other boxes. A tiara of diamonds and rubies was perched on her bluish-white hair; her neck, too, trembling

slightly but incessantly with old age, was encased in a dog-collar of rubies and diamonds. Old Mrs. Johnson looked very queenly and hopelessly out of keeping with the times, a fine, exquisite period piece from her tiara down to her very pointed patent leather shoes, with her Chantilly shawl around her wrinkled shoulders, and her painted fan in her white-gloved hands. No one could have perceived that all this patrician splendour had begun to disintegrate, that dry rot was eating up the old family, that the rubies and the diamonds were only paste, while even the sale of the real jewels had not helped much to stave off the collapse of the family fortunes.

Mrs. Johnson searched the box of Henry Carter for her son, Peter Johnson, but he was not there yet, neither were the young people, her grandson, Peter Johnson, Junior, and Mabel Carter. Only Henry Carter sat there, handsome and slick in his marvellous evening suit. Mrs. Johnson thought of him with slight contempt as a social climber, for it was only three years since Henry Carter had landed in the Social Register. Mrs. Johnson's shoulders drooped a bit, she felt tired all of a sudden. She did not like the Carters, neither handsome Henry nor his pretty daughter Mabel, and yet, her grandson's engagement to Mabel was the only thing that might give support to the imperilled firm of Johnson and Johnson in these trying times. She sighed and moved her glasses from the box down to the orchestra pit, where the musicians waited for Pierre Colin. She too waited for him and for the miracles he could do with his *bâton*. Thinking of Pierre she forgot everything else. The house seemed even more draughty than usual, and her hands in her white gloves felt cold and numb. Mrs. Carter, just past seventy, was a very old woman and to-night she felt her age.

Fourteen years difference—it had not seemed much when she had been thirty-nine and Pierre Colin twenty-five. But now there was an abyss of age between her tottering seventy

and Pierre Colin's powerful, burning, energetic fifty-six. It was like looking across the Grand Cañon, it made her dizzy. She closed her eyes, as everything seemed to be revolving round her, and for a second she felt like calling for help. Then the attack subsided and her heart beat steadily again. "High blood pressure," she thought, "I must ask Dr. Caro to give me some injections." Inside her eyelids was a kaleidoscopic medley of pictures; they came and glided by and were gone like slides in a magic lantern. It's not true that one's memory gets weaker with age, she thought, it's just the contrary. The past became clearer and clearer, every detail sharp and big, while the present seemed blurred and insignificant. Looking back through the years was like looking at life through a microscope.

The gardenia from her hothouse which he had worn in his funny black suit: it had wilted, turned brown, dried up and still he had worn it. The heavy gold seal with the head of Brahms which hung from his watch-fob. The silky little beard he had grown to look older, to look old enough to be her lover. Madness of kisses in the dark, she thought. It must have been a line in some poem or in one of his letters. Madness of kisses in the dark, thought Mrs. Carter, a white-haired old lady with tiara, Chantilly and white gloves. Love, passion, sin, madness of kisses in the dark: "I had my share," she thought with a deep, triumphant scorn for the patrician world in which she had spent her life.

The poor young musical assistant whom her husband had brought into their home to play the piano at their receptions. The hours in the music room of the old house when it got darker and they stopped playing and sat silent with pulsing nerves, before the butler came in to light the gas flames of the chandelier. The shape of his hands, the bitter taste of cigarettes on his lips, the insane, dangerous, delirious meetings in his studio. The sleigh ride in Vermont. The trip on a crowded Sunday boat to Sandy Hook. The music, the

longing, the insanity of it all, the impact of this strange meteor-like being from a different plane on her own soft, overstuffed, plush-covered life. "Love," thought Mrs. Carter, "what do the young people of to-day know of love?" The deadly danger of love, the ecstasy of being in sin, the secret, the mystery, the forbidden passion, the hidden pain. They have killed love with all their sloppy tolerance, with all this messy business of elopement and divorce and elopement again. The evening after they had parted for ever, she had presided at an official dinner for twelve. A former President had been her neighbour at table. She wore a low-cut dress of shot taffeta and a bow of the same taffeta in her hair. She had parted from Pierre, and it was like dying every minute anew with unbearable pain. And there she had been smiling, talking, watching the guests and the servants, presiding in her taffeta dress, the perfect hostess, the lady of the house without a stain on her reputation, but with a heart broken into sharp little splinters. Later she had gone into the nursery and put her head down on the pillow next to her little daughter's head and there she had fallen asleep. . . .

Mrs. Carter opened her eyes with a start. Her head had sunk forward but she didn't believe that she had dozed off. Why don't they ever start? she thought impatiently. Again the theatre with all its faces, boxes, balconies began to revolve in front of her, but she pulled herself together and fixed her eyes steadily upon the frame of the stage, and after a few seconds it all came to a stop like a merry-go-round when it slows down. She took her opera glass and directed it upon an empty seat in the first row. Her fingertips were numb and stiff, like wood. "Maybe I'm beginning to die inch by inch," she thought with a little smile. Though she felt old and tired she never thought of death. She was very impatient now that it should begin, that Pierre should take his place and raise his *bâton* so that her eyes and ears and her heart and her whole being might feast again for one whole, long, happy

evening. And now the lights dimmed down and the house grew silent. Mrs. Carter's opera glass was focused on a woman who pushed her way along the knees of the people in the first row and sat down on the seat in the centre.

It was a heavy woman of nondescript appearance. She had a simple, almost common face, her colourless hair was not dressed, just slapped onto her head somehow; the cut of her purple, ill-fitting velvet gown was very bad and the brown, outmoded evening wrap bore no relation whatsoever to it. She dumped herself down on the seat like a tired charwoman, and thus she sat with her knees wide apart and her hands folded in her vast lap. This was Margot Colin, Pierre's present wife.

"Poor Pierre Colin!" Mrs. Carter thought.

"Poor Pierre Colin," the people said; "Poor Pierre Colin," the world said, "what a wife he's got this time! Did you see Mrs. Colin? Doesn't she look awful? And, my dear, did you talk to her? Where *did* he pick her up? In the gutter, in the kitchen, in a third-class waiting-room when he missed his train? Poor Pierre Colin, what did he ever see in her? And it seems he can't get rid of her, poor Pierre Colin!"

Twelve minutes before the curtain time Colin had finished his rounds through all the dressing-rooms, had given every singer in the cast a handshake, a smile, some advice or a scolding, he had seen the concert-master about the cuts he was going to make, the first flute player about the tempo of his solo in the third interlude. He had gone down to the room where the musicians changed into their evening coats, had told them a funny anecdote and announced that Bhakaroff wanted to transpose the toreador song. He had held a short palaver with the four musical assistants who were on stage duty for the evening, and then he had gone upstairs to the dressing-rooms of the chorus. He had given a bright new silver coin

for good luck to each of the four men who would sing the little solos in the first act and he had shouted a few gallant remarks in Italian into the dressing-room of the ladies. He had left the most unpleasant duty for the last, the unavoidable dispute with the chorus master. This man, a fat and irritable Italian, despised anything that was not Italian; singers, conductors and operas in general. And Carmen especially was a thorn in his flesh, because the chorus never 'clicked' in Carmen. There were three danger zones in this wretched opera, and even if a chorus master came down from heaven, he could hardly prevent them. The boys' chorus in the first act always went flat in the last bars instead of fading out melodiously in the distance. The chorus of the quarrelling cigarette girls had not a chance of coming off right because Colin took it too fast. And the end of the first act was bound to be *un disastro*, because this idiotic stage director, Dr. Mayer, had ordered the singers to jump about like crazy monkeys instead of standing still and watching his signs. While Colin tried his best to soothe this difficult man, he felt his own nerves grow tauter and tauter. All day long he had smoked countless cigarettes and although he knew it was bad for his heart, he kept on lighting a fresh cigarette with the last one. He stopped for a moment in front of an open window through which the noise of the town came floating in on the moist evening air. Taking a deep breath he stood and listened. Broadway threw up red reflections into the nightly sky. There was New York, eight million people who could relax, whose work was done, who were allowed to be tired, to be carefree, to do what they liked, get drunk, raise hell, or just go to sleep. He felt an immeasurable desire to be one of them, take his hat and coat and leave the theatre. He felt very small and unimportant, a frightened little man, longing to desert his post. He held his breath because now he felt it coming and had no power to stop it, the same old agony: stage fright. A wave of cold sweat beginning in his

spine and covering his whole body like a wet blanket. The sick feeling in the pit of the stomach, the shaking hands, the miserable, unbearable loss of dignity that goes with this most ridiculous nervous disease.

He lit another cigarette and, unable to find any further excuse for postponing the torture, he went into his room to change into his dress clothes. It was a small room, shopworn and shabby in spite of some feeble efforts at comfort. There was no carpet, the couch had hard lumps and the wall behind it showed greasy spots where generations of conductors had rested their brilliantined heads. There was a locker, a wash-basin in one corner, a closet with a little mirror in the other. Margot was waiting for him, she had sprayed some pine fluid and the air smelt sweet and fresh. She knew that he suffered from chills before each performance and she had brought their own little electric stove along and plugged it in the wall next to the couch. On the table was a bowl with fresh fruit, his dressing-gown hung over a chair and his shirt laid out for him, with every button in place. She had put a bucket with ice on a little table. Champagne, brandy and two medicine bottles. On a piece of black velvet she had spread out a whole array of his *bâtons*. With an almost sensuous pleasure he fingered each of the slender, white sticks, weighed them in the crook of one finger, swished them through the air and finally selected one for the night. Margot followed his movements with great attention but silently; she did not care for conversation and this was one of her great assets. Pierre threw his cigarette away and began to undress. She came with a steaming cup from the stove.

"Too hot," he said. She held it up to his lips as if he were a reluctant child. "Just drink it hot, Ponpon, it'll do you good," she said. He drank it down, it was some bromide tasting like consommé. He hoped it would settle his rebellious stomach, but it did nothing of the kind. He flung himself on the couch, and groaned miserably.

"I am very sick, Margot," he said, "very sick."

"*Pauvre Ponpon*," she said, "*mon pauvre Ponpon, il est tellement malade.*"

"I can't go on like this, I have to cancel," he moaned. "Call Certosa, tell him I want to cancel, let some assistant take care of their damned opera."

"No, no, you can't cancel, Ponpon," she said. "You can't make yourself the laughing stock of the theatre. Come, let me massage you, here, that's better, isn't it?" She knelt down, rubbed him with a warm towel, washed his face, took off his shoes, undressed him like a baby. She brought a big bottle of eau-de-cologne and began to massage his body, a young, firm, well-trained body, but bluish and clammy now like that of a man just saved from drowning. Step by step, she got him ready for the performance. "I am a brave man, Margot," he muttered. "I am a very brave man."

"Yes, Ponpon, yes, you are brave," she said.

She had been his nurse during some illness and she knew what he needed. To balance one stimulant, one medicine, against the other and keep his nervous system just at the right pitch for his task, was a complicated and exacting ritual. Bromides to calm him down, Bensedrin to clear his memory, Adrenalin against his low blood pressure, Thyroid to counteract a deficiency of his glands, hormones to preserve his vigour and aggressive power. She knew how to treat him, knew when to console him like a crying baby, when to shout at him: she would have beaten him if she had found it necessary. Pierre Colin had been married several times before, he had had innumerable romances, *affaires*, infatuations. But Margot was the first woman fit for him. Margot, so dull, so phlegmatic, so homely, so unselfish, so entirely without vanity that she was almost non-existent; she was the first woman whose company he could endure.

She left the room untidy to be in her place when Pierre began the overture. He needed her close to him until the

first few minutes were over. Later, Margot knew, he would forget her and everything else and she could slip back and tidy up the room. He was a good man and he made lots of money. She had nothing to complain of and she could not understand why Pierre's other wives could not get along with him. He was as easy to handle as a sick child. In her dim and dense mind she had perceived the main thing: that Pierre Colin was not a man but a performer. That with him nothing counted but the performance; that he was like a racehorse that had to win the race and like a man on a trapeze who would break his neck if he were not in good shape. She hoped his heart would hold out if she took good care of him. She felt safe and sure as his wife. She had got him for good and he would not run away from her as he had done from his other wives. He needed her. He needed her. She sat down in the first row, a bit tired after the ordeal of getting Ponpon ready, and gave a deep sigh of satisfaction.

But Pierre Colin, flitting through the orchestra pit like a streak of silver, had reached his stand, smiled at his army of musicians, given a nonchalant bow to the stamping and clapping and cheering audience, had closed his eyes for a second in fakir-like concentration and had raised his magic wand.

Five past eight. The race was on. The opera had begun.

THE FIRST ACT

“**A**ND now I have a few precious minutes for you, my dear,” Madame told Peter Johnson, as she returned from her successful trip to the telephone. She had hoped, in fact, that he would have left her dressing-room during her absence, but there he was sitting in her wicker chair exactly as before. She cast an impatient glance at him and decided to make the best of it. There were still ten minutes time before her first entrance and she was willing to sacrifice one or two of them to her old and most faithful admirer.

“You look a bit seedy, someone ought to take you away for a holiday, Peter,” she said, managing at the same time to keep one eye on the wrist watch and the other on her reflection in the mirrored walls.

“But *you* look wonderful, younger and better every time I’m seeing you,” he said and pulled his chair closer to hers.

“D’you know, my back is still tanned from last year? It’s my souvenir of Egypt,” she said, pushing her gypsy shirt back to show him the golden gleam on her neck and shoulders. He inspected the offered area with an adoring smile. “It’s a shame I had to sell the yacht,” he said. Madame had been a guest on the Johnson yacht for last year’s cruise in the Mediterranean and a trip up the Nile, as far as Luxor and Assuan. “And not only the yacht——” Johnson added. While she painted her mouth he got up and walked backwards and forwards, picking up things and putting them down in an absent minded and slightly impatient way. “What is he fidgeting around for?” thought Madame. “What has *he* got to be impatient about? One would think he is the one to sing Carmen. *Yeshishmareea*, he’s looking for his flowers.”

"Thanks for the lovely flowers, Peter," she said, covering her embarrassment with her best smile. "I sent them on to my hotel, the poor things fade so quickly here."

Now it was Mr. Johnson's turn to be embarrassed for he hadn't sent any flowers, as he knew that Kati didn't care for them and was relieved to save a high florist's bill. He went into elaborate explanation, trying to clear up an issue which Madame had profoundly confused, but he was interrupted by a knock at the door. The round face of the stage manager appeared, announcing that the opera had begun.

"There, there—the overture has started, you must go," Madame said in breathless haste, handing him his cane and top hat. If she were not left alone soon, she felt that she was bound to suffer something like a nervous breakdown. Her voice seemed to be dried up from too much gabbling and talking and babbling and she had forgotten every note and word of her part. But Peter, otherwise such a tactful, well-bred and extremely well-mannered gentleman, simply stayed on, driving Madame into a frenzy.

"I'll skip the overture," he said. "I'll play hookey for once. I've come to discuss a little problem with you and I knew this would be the only minute when I would have a chance to see you alone."

"Yes, Peter?" Madame said, putting her last resources of patience and kindness into a cramped smile.

"It is—in fact—I need your help—in a matter of great importance to all of us," Mr. Johnson said.

At this Semper, who had been pottering around all the time, disappeared from the room like a ghost. Mr. Johnson was a very influential member of the board of directors and Semper didn't want to lose her job. Left alone with him, Madame felt a minor explosion rising up inside her but managed with a supreme effort of self-control to hold it down once more.

"Yes, Peter?" she repeated gently and, taking Petrushka on her lap and stroking the familiar wooden limbs of the doll, she tried to relax her taut nerves.

"I'll go straight to the point," Peter Johnson announced. "It's about my son."

"Douglas?" Madame asked; hazily she remembered someone long-legged and very young, dressed in white pants, leaning against the rail, dancing with her in Cairo, and kissing her once or twice.

"Who is Douglas?" Johnson asked bewildered.

"Well, isn't he your son?" Madame asked back.

"No. We Johnsons have had the name of Peter for four generations," Peter Johnson answered. Family pride was the backbone of his existence and now Madame had hurt his feelings. It took another precious half minute to straighten out this new confusion, before he could tell Madame that young Johnson seemed to have fallen in love with her and, being a very adamant fellow, made unexpected difficulties concerning his planned engagement to be married to Mabel Carter. An engagement that was of vital importance, not only for himself but for the maintenance, yes, for the very existence, of the old established banking firm of Johnson and Johnson. Madame had begun pacing up and down again, looking more and more like a caged lioness. "But this is crazy," she called out, "this is ridiculous, this is preposterous of the boy. Why, I don't even know his name—believe me, believe me, Peter," she said and turned abruptly to her old friend. "Believe me that I have done nothing in the world to encourage such a silly notion. How did he ever get the idea——?"

"It must be hereditary," Johnson said quietly.

"Ah, but that's different," Madame said impetuously, putting her hands on his shoulders. "We are friends. You are my best friend, Peter; my only real friend. I am so much—at home with you." She smiled into his eyes and added

slowly the line which worked miracles with every man: "I am afraid, I like you very much, Peter."

"I know you do or I would not trouble you with my worries," he said and kissed her palms again. "You see, if it were only a case of the boy having an adolescent crush on you, I should be very glad about it. It's in the family, we all are opera fans, beginning with my mother—who sends her best regards, by the way, and who is here to-night, of course. But the last year was crushing, Kati, crushing, and I have strained every nerve to save the ship. But I can't do it without Peter. He must marry. He must marry Mabel Carter and everything will be all right. There is something in the air—a merger of Johnson and Carter, you understand. That marriage would put us right back on our feet. He liked her quite a lot before he met you—can't you help me to set him straight again? You are the only one who can do it, because the more I talk against you the more obstinate he gets. It's the Johnson brand of tenacity and I cannot break it. But if you——"

Madame stopped short in front of him. "So that's it," she cried. "You've warned your son against me, you don't want him to have anything to do with me. Did I catch you, Peter? And then you come to me and want me to help you against myself?"

Johnson got up, tall and a bit too heavy. "You know how I feel about you, Kati," he said, very serious. "Help me to make the boy marry Mabel and save the firm. And then, maybe, you will permit me to ask you once more—you know what. And maybe this time you won't give me a No for an answer."

It sounded so grave and old-fashioned, it chilled her to the bone. Too bad he hasn't the right approach, she thought. It was the third time he had chosen the worst moment for his elaborate proposal. He was a good man; Madame, who knew men, had no doubt about it. A good, fine, reliable sort

of a man, and very restful when you were tired. But Madame wasn't tired, not yet. "Not yet," she thought in an odd sort of panic, "not yet, not yet, not for another ten years . . ."

She shot a fleeting glance at her coat which Semper had neatly put on a hanger. In the buttonhole of that coat shimmered what prevented Madame from paying more attention to Peter Johnson's courtship: a golden little pheasant feather. This feather had been taken from the hat of Antony, the wonderful man she had met on the boat, the man whose telephone call she impatiently expected to-night, the last of the men with whom she had fallen in love. There hadn't been an hour in Madame's life when she had not been in love—ever since she had worshipped the butcher boy at the age of six. And she expected to be still in love if she lived to be ninety, for love was her native element. Antony had shot the pheasant himself, somewhere in England. He was a man's man, the smell of peat, leather, tobacco went with him, a dried sprig of heather in his tweed coat, a rugged face and, in exciting contrast, long, sensitive hands. She went over and gave the little feather a tender, teasing little tug.

"Well, Kati?" Johnson asked her. But at the same moment there came a distant patter like heavy, far-off rain, and all Madame could do was to push Peter away.

"Listen—applause, the overture is over," she whispered. Her throat went dry and her breath short with the fever of the last minutes before her cue.

"And what about Peter?" he asked in the door which she had rudely opened for him. Semper stood outside, rigid, reproachful and nervous.

"Leave me alone now, for heaven's sake, leave me alone! Send him to me during the big intermission, but go now," Madame shouted, slamming the door into his face. Alone in the room—for Semper didn't count—she went through a frenzied ritual, like a savage appeasing his cruel gods. A cross over her own chest and one over Petrushka. Swal-

lowing two raw eggs, cleaning her nose thoroughly. Spitting over her left shoulder. Grasping desperately the score to read through the first cue, those crucial first notes and words, sung a thousand times and each time dreaded afresh. *Quand je vous aimerai? Ma foi! je ne sais pas.* Her heart was pounding, her head felt empty, her throat was dry again the moment she had swallowed down the eggs. Closing her eyes and folding her hands she stood for a moment in prayer. "*Otebe naash, ktery jsi na nebesech. Poslyet se ymayne tray. Prsheed knaam. . . .*" Three knocks at the door: "Madame Lanik, on the stage!"

"Coming," she sang out and there, amazingly, her voice was back with her again. She shook off Semper's hands—dressers always had something to pin on at the last moment—and bursting with something which was between fear and happiness, she rushed through the corridor, down the steps and towards the stage. Her high heels clattered noisily and this too made her happy. She flung herself against the heavy steel door of the stage, she felt strong and very, very young. When she arrived backstage at the foot of the scaffold which supported the stair for her entrance, she had mysteriously changed into Carmen. There had occurred that subtle and inexplicable process which blotted out her own self and moulded her into another being.

There was a whispering, tense silence in the semi-darkness of the wings. From the scene the Cigarette Chorus floated by, little blue clouds of music.

"*Mein Name ist Mayer,*" somebody whispered to her. Go to hell, she thought savagely. The stage director took her hand and led her up the precarious, makeshift stairs which took her to the place of her entrance. A young musical assistant followed, pimple-faced and swarthy, an open score in one hand, a little torchlight in the other. He took his post next to her, his shortsighted eyes were anxiously bent over the score, to give her the cue. As if she needed anyone to

send her on the stage. "*Quand je vous aimerai, ma foi, je ne sais pas*——" Now—now—now——

"Excuse me, Madame," someone said. "May I talk to you for a moment? It's about the kid——"

Only in a flash of fury she saw his face, an anxious face shining with sweat, the eyes very white in it. But she had used up her entire store of kindness and patience and she exploded at this most inappropriate moment. "Go to hell," she murmured, almost choking with anger.

"But the baby, they took her to the hospital," the man said. She pushed him aside, not to miss her cue. She heard him rumbling down the steps and somebody hissing backstage: "*Rube!* Silence! For God's sake!"

Now—now—now——

"Go!" the musical assistant said. And Carmen, a high-heeled, sloppily-dressed, insolent, brown, smiling Gypsy, strolled down the stairs walking into the bright light of the stage, into the eager patter of applause as if the whole breathless house, all those rows on rows of people, all these listening tiers of boxes and balconies and galleries up there did not exist.

Backstage, Dr. Mayer hissed at Joe: "What's the idea, making such a racket in the wings?"

"Sorry," Joe muttered, "I must have slipped," trying to steady himself after his fall, he touched the bump which had started to swell on the back of his head. Sweat poured down his face and his hands trembled. The German looked at him, worried.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"It's nothing," Joe said. "It's only because of the kid. They took her to the hospital, my wife 'phoned me. They might have to operate on her. You couldn't let me off, could you? I'd like to see my kid before—before——"

"Sorry, Forest," the director said. "We have to stick to

our guns. This is a difficult opera with all the props. Something might happen if I let you off. She'll be better, don't worry——"

Joe gave a bitter little laugh. "Don't worry?" he said. "You have no children, I take it."

"No," Dr. Mayer answered. "But I had a little brother. He got killed on the street, in Berlin, on November the tenth, 1938. . . ."

The performace was well under way by now. The boys' chorus had gone flat as expected, but otherwise everything went smoothly. Carmen had sung her Habanera, about Love that was a Wild Bird, and been thanked by an exuberant burst of applause. She had flirted with Don José, the young soldier, had thrown her flower at him and run off into the cigarette factory, or rather, she had missed it because, as a result of Dr. Mayer's queer ideas, it happened to be on the wrong side of the stage.

Bhakaroff had arrived backstage just in time to make a Russian cross over Sybil, slightly touching her forehead, heart and shoulders, before she went on for her next cue. With monocle fixed in his left eye, he remained in the wings to listen to her. Her voice had a clear and silvery quality, a keen tang like a bubbling mountain brook. Sybil's voice was young, that was it, Sybil was young. Standing in the wings, where he had only a dim view of the stage, Bhakaroff listend to this young and unspoilt voice with a burning, and yet delightful, envy. Dear, lovely voice of youth, soaring up so easily, so effortless, so untouched yet by life. Oh, keen voice of youth not to know fear, fatigue, distrust and the slow, painful process of gradual dissolution day by day. . . . Bhakaroff took the monocle from his eye and angrily rubbed his lids. He would have liked to watch Sybil, and he blinked several times to clear his sight. But all he saw were

formless shapes moving in the sharp light of the stage; even his left eye began to smart now and he pushed the monocle in again.

"Un baiser pour son fils !" sang Sybil, *"José, je vous le rends comme je l'ai promis."* Now Don José would take her in his arms and kiss her. Bhakaroff knew stage kisses. Smell of grease paint, lips that did not touch, unwanted proximity of another made-up, perspiring face; routine and make-believe. Yet he could not help feeling disturbed and annoyed, even jealous of the embrace out there on the stage which he could not see. Nonsense, he thought; we are leaving to-night, to-morrow we'll be married. She won't see him again, not for a long time, at least. She will forget him. I'll make her forget him. He tried to convince himself, yet he could not make himself believe it. There would be other theatres, other performances, other tenors. All of a sudden it seemed to him as if the whole world were full of young and dangerous Don Josés and Sybil would sing duets with them all and fall in love with one of them. Because the Micaelas and Don Josés of this world were simple and naïve and young and they were made for each other. While the Bhakaroffs knew too much of life; what he had to offer—call it experience, mellow scepticism, showmanship, technique, call it even art—did not count much with the young and innocent. . . .

"How are you to-night?" someone whispered behind his shoulder. He turned round and perceived dimly the haggard face and unruly hair of Dr. Mayer.

"Thank you, as well as a man can be who is going to be chained for life to-night," he tried to joke in German.

"My congratulations. My deepest and most sincere congratulations," Dr. Mayer said, emphatically but in the same backstage whisper. Bhakaroff gave him a sympathetic smile. The rumour would have it that the German had fallen hard for Sybil, although he had hardly talked with her at all,

except when giving her the necessary orders during the rehearsals for Carmen.

"Would you mind looking at the new set during the big intermission?" Dr. Mayer went on. He was proud of the new sets but also constantly worried that something might go wrong with them, and for good reason. They were so different, you see.

"Why, certainly not, I'd love to go through all my steps," Bhakaroff answered. He had not rehearsed in the new sets and sang the part for the first time in this season.

"I wouldn't trouble you, but this is one of the evenings when things have a tendency to go wrong," Mayer whispered with a sigh.

"I wouldn't say that, it brings bad luck," Bhakaroff answered, slightly impatient. He would have preferred being left alone to listen to Sybil's duet; but Dr. Mayer loved Bhakaroff, he admired him, he believed he had found a kindred soul in this Russian and he had to talk to someone about his troubles.

"You might not have noticed, but one of our prop. men spoiled Carmen's first entrance, he fell down a stair and bumped his head pretty badly. And then she made her first exit at the wrong side of the stage—and she insists on wearing her own costumes: they are like a slap in the face, they practically ruin the entire scene."

"That's true in a way," Bhakaroff said, though he had seen nothing of Carmen's costumes.

"I am sorry for that prop. man," Dr. Mayer whispered. "He seems to have some private trouble. But so has everyone private trouble. *Du lieber Gott!* The things they have done to my family, the letters I receive from home, the friends who have committed suicide, the people in the prison camps—I know what it is to have private trouble. But private trouble is no excuse for falling down on the job, is it?"

"You shouldn't make too much of trifling accidents," Bhakaroff said. "They happen in every performance and will always happen. They don't matter one way or another."

"No, they don't, I know it. It's ridiculous what we are doing here, it's utterly unimportant, absolutely futile," Dr. Mayer agreed hastily. "Outside there is the whole world, there's war in China, there's one war after another in Europe, there's turmoil everywhere. Inside, there's nothing but this dusty, old opera. Yet, there is one thing to justify what we are doing: striving for perfection. True, sometimes I am inclined to think that perfection is the thing that doesn't exist. Yet, Bhakaroff, believe me, this too is a world, a small but compact world, all compressed in this one block on Broadway. Look at the people in the audience, just look at them. It's escape for them, whatever you say. Escape from boredom, emptiness, idle preoccupation for the rich; escape from the humdrum of their work and worry for the poor. It's escape people need to-day more than ever before. And look at the lovers in the audience; there are lovers everywhere, some are happy, some are unhappy, but they are inarticulate, all of them. The opera expresses for them what they are unable or ashamed to express themselves, and they go home, elated and relieved. The miracles we can do with a few square feet of stage, the illusions we can create, right here in this old hovel of an opera house. The fates that pass through it, the ambitions, the heartbreak, the ups and downs. I love this world, this mysterious, strong, little world inside this house. Another performance every night. Another bunch of singers coming in and going out every year. The young and unknown ones going up the ladder, the old and famous ones going down. Always the same operas. Always Carmen. Always the few simple emotions, on the stage and off. Love and hatred. Jealousy and trust. Happiness and desperation. Sweet sacrifice and sinister murder. Good and bad. Black and white. It's humanity,

stripped of its trimmings and left with the few simple things that really count. . . .”

“And the orchestra plays umtata to our emotions,” Bhakaroff threw in, for he was not in his best mood to-night. But Dr. Mayer would not be interrupted. “Sometimes I can feel those subtle vibrations between the stage and the audience like something tangible, something——”

“Silence in the wings!” was hissed at him and the stage manager, rotund and perspiring, popped up at his side. “Excuse me, I didn’t know it was you,” he whispered, but he took his stand next to the voluble stage director to prevent him from making more noise than was admissable. Mike Stern followed in his wake, ready for his next cue.

“Hello, Bhakaroff,” he said grandly; he would have clapped the great man’s shoulder if he had not been too short to reach it. It was the most triumphant moment of his new career so far: talking to Bhakaroff as an equal. “Hello, Bhakaroff, how’s your voice to-night?” Bhakaroff pretended to be engrossed in the dust on the stage, so Mike turned to his other enemy, Dr. Mayer. “You know what’s the trouble with you,” he said, “You are a foreigner, you are too highbrow for us Americans. I’ve just stood in the next wing and heard you fairly pouring out philosophy. Well, let me tell you, that’s all hokum, that won’t sell a single ticket, believe me, for I’ve been in this business since I was a kid. What do the people out there want? Voices. Nothing but voices. Singers that can sing and voices that are voices. I am glad I got my voice, that’s all I can say!”

“Excuse me,” Dr. Mayer said and pushed Mike aside to make room for Micaela’s exit. Yet Sybil didn’t notice him, she was a bit out of breath as she came running into the wing and took Bhakaroff’s arm, while the staccato of the applause out there died down.

“Do you hear?” she said happily, “they are very nice to-night!” “They,” that was the audience, that unseen

conglomeration of people in the packed house, their moods, their tastes, their willingness to accept and to give.

"How was it?" Sybil asked eagerly, squeezing Bhakaroff's arm.

"Excellent, Miss Olivier, excellent," Dr. Mayer answered without having been asked. Sybil gave him a brief and preoccupied smile as if she had difficulty remembering who he was and pulled Bhakaroff away. "How did the A come off? I tried to bring it into my forehead as you told me. Was it better? Was it? You don't look as if you were satisfied with me," she said, searching his clouded face.

"You were splendid, my darling, splendid," he said, absently drawing her hand to his mouth and kissing it. She was not exactly trembling but vibrating, like all stage people. It felt like a motor turned on inside her. Now, being so close to her, he could see her quite clearly: her hair, caught in a coarse black net, her lovely throat with the veins pulsing in it, even the blue make-up lines around her eyes. And once more, as so often before, a sudden relief surged up in him as he thought: "There is nothing the matter with my eyesight."

"What now?" she said as she left the wings. "Where are we going to see the tapirs?"

It was her name for the reporters, because of their ability to extend their noses to any required length, dig up anthills of excitement and snoop into every hidden hole of anybody's private life. Bhakaroff believed in publicity and he got a great deal of it, for himself, and, since recently, for Sybil also. He was supported in his efforts by Naggy, his publicity agent, a young woman of Hungarian descent, shrill and strident as an alarm clock. At this moment Naggy was busy entertaining the tapirs at the Press room of the Metropolitan, where they waited to corner Bhakaroff and his bride for a last interview before their wedding.

"You'll have time enough to see them during the next act, and you'd better change into mufti, darling. The blue

ensemble with the blue fox, I would suggest—and very little make-up. Let them see that you don't need it. We'll fill them up with champagne, you can trust Naggy to have everything ready and in good style."

"Must we go through all this?" Sybil asked, bravely smiling up to him, as she linked her arm into his and led him behind the backdrop and across the stage.

"I'm afraid so," he said. They had almost reached the other side of the stage when he tripped over one of the cables which crept along the floor like so many snakes. "*Merde*"—he muttered as he tried to keep his balance and bumped into a man in overalls.

"I am sorry, Mr. Bhakaroff," the man said humbly, "I didn't see you—I was in a hurry—the telephone——"

"All right, all right," Bhakaroff said irritably. "Why do they have to keep their confounded stage so dark? Some day someone is going to break his neck."

"Yes, Sir," Joe Forest muttered and stumbled on towards the exit. Sybil looked after his disappearing back with sympathy. "His baby is sick, they took her to the hospital with appendicitis and he is afraid they are going to operate on her," she said. "Poor devil, and he can't get away from his job."

"How do you know about it?" Bhakaroff asked.

"He told me. He is one of my friends."

"You have lots of friends, haven't you, my darling?" he said. It sounded more bitter than he had intended and she took his arm again and for a moment put her head against his shoulder. By now they had reached the corridor on the ladies' side and stopped in front of her dressing-room. "*Au revoir*, my love," he said and bent down to kiss her. She drew back imperceptibly. "*Pas ici*——" she muttered, as a stagehand pushed by, carrying a hedge of dryly rustling paper shrubs.

"To-night we'll be alone," he whispered back in French. She smiled at him, a brave and strangely humble smile.

Petite vierge, he thought, and now he kissed her all the same, stagehand or not.

"Don't forget, darling, we'll have to give a good show of Great Romance to the tapers," he said afterwards.

"How awful," Sybil said. "Do we really have to?"

"I'm afraid so," he said. "We have to give them what they expect or there will be hell to pay. If people go to the Zoo they want the monkeys to behave like monkeys and the lions like lions, or there would be great disappointment all around. Well, we are on exhibition in a cage too, we have to behave like Operatic Stars Sailing On The *Normandie* On Their Wedding Eve. Buck up, dear. It's part of being a good trooper, it's a simple bit of showmanship. At midnight it will be all over and you can take a good rest."

"At midnight?" Sybil thought in a panic. No, at midnight it will only begin. He seemed to sense her innermost thoughts, for he said gently: "Frightened, *mon petit joujou*?"

"A bit," she said.

"Frightened of me?" he asked.

"No, not of you, Sasha. Of it all. Of marriage—it's such a big thing, getting married, isn't it?"

He would have liked to know if she had tears in her eyes; but when he cupped his hands under her chin and turned her face towards him he saw it only like a pink and white disc with holes in it for eyes.

"You have known me for five years," he said, "and we have seen each other almost every day during those five years; tell me: did I ever hurt you?"

"No, never," Sybil thought sadly. That's just what made it so hopeless. He had taught her singing, he had yelled at her, had trained her with the severity of a lion-tamer, had tired her out, had made her work and work and work again, had scolded her, had made her cry, had made her almost faint with exhaustion: but he had never hurt her, never. She searched for something to say.

"We'll be very happy," she muttered. "Don't mind me. I am simply nervous. It's like having stagefright."

Suddenly he grasped her in his arms and kissed her with a savage sort of desperation. "You belong to me, don't you? You love me, don't you? Say that you love me, say it——" he murmured between kisses.

"Yes," Sybil answered obediently. "I love you, Sasha, I do love you, I do——"

There were voices, sounds of steps at the end of the corridor, a stir of noise and activity as the first act approached its last scene and the chorus got ready for its entrance. Faintly, muffled by the steel doors of the stage, she could hear Robert Marsh's voice. "*Carmen, je suis comme un homme ivre.*" "I hope he'll have a great success," she thought. "It will help him to forget me, success means so much more to men than love and all that."

"There comes Slickum," she told Bhakaroff. Slickum was Bhakaroff's man, a short, wiry, coloured fellow, whom he had picked up in some vaudeville, after Slickum had broken a leg. The dark tyrant came down the passage, whistling.

"So that's where you's keepin' you'sself," he said, with grave reproach but clowning all the time. "How's you think I's ever goin' an' get you dressed on time an' you hangin' 'round the ladies' side. Shame on you—ain't there plenty time for makin' love on the *Nobmandie*—an' plenty o' space too? An' Miss Naggy goin' crazy all over the place with them repohters waitin'. Now, come on, Mist' Bakrow, come on along and let's all get pretty for them ladies out in the audience, there we go now, there——"

And with this Slickum gave Sybil a confidential wink, took Bhakaroff's elbow in his sure, experienced hands and, still prattling on, steered him safely through the bedlam of the finishing act, across the stage to the gentlemen's side and into his dressing-room.

As usual, Mabel Carter and young Peter Johnson had been late; they had quarrelled about it on the way, because each of them had good reasons for wanting to be especially punctual to-night. They had barked and growled at each other like two fighting puppies while their car had been stuck in the evening traffic. Nevertheless, their entrance in the Carter box was very effective and decorous and quite a few heads turned away from the stage in their direction. Mabel was acclaimed the most sophisticated debutante of the season, although inside that impressive shell there dwelt a shy, emotional and childish young girl. To-night Mabel wore a white gown of expensive simplicity, and a coat of platinum fox. Peter could not but acknowledge grudgingly that she was the best-looking girl in the whole Opera House.

"Hello, Henry," she whispered to her father, who used to call her his Little Girl Friend.

"Hello, Punk," he whispered back.

After shaking hands with old Peter Johnson, who pushed a chair in front for her, she immediately focused her whole attention on the stage.

"What's the matter, Punk?" young Peter asked her, when she dropped her evening bag for the third time. "Nothing, I'm having the jitters," she answered guiltily. "Because of *that* fellow?" he whispered to her, indicating with his chin Robert Marsh, who wasn't singing at the moment but sitting astride his chair, almost in the centre of the stage, fiddling with a little chain, while Carmen sang her Habanera. Mabel threw a quick glance at her father, but Henry had heard nothing. A slow blush rose in her face and ebbed away again. Peter patted her shoulder as he used to do to his nervous polo pony, but he, too, kept his eyes on the stage. They were pals, they had always known each other, they had shared chocolate bars, tennis rackets, auto accidents, secrets, trips to Miami and the mutual experience of their first kiss. Theirs had been what Mabel, from the height of her present

state, called puppy love. For now she had had the tough luck to fall in love with a young man in her father's bank, this Robert Marsh, this Don José of to-night, and Peter was the only person to share her secret so far. Bob seemed very strange to her in his costume and make-up, still more of a stranger than usual. They had not met very often. The first time he had only opened the door of her father's sanctuary for her. "Good morning, Miss Carter, nice day to-day."

"Good morning, yes, isn't it lovely outside?"

"This is Bob, Mabel, he'll help you with the telephone."

"Thank you so much, Bob, I really can do it myself."

"I love doing it for you, Miss Carter."

Then that awful boat trip down to Rye which the staff of the bank made every summer, democratically presided over by Henry and adorned with her presence. "What a blessing to have you here, Bob. You are the only one who can dance and talk. We have a lot in common, haven't we?"

"I'm glad you think so, Miss Carter."

"Please, don't Miss Carter me, I'm Mabel."

"Thanks, Miss Carter—I mean Mabel. You look lovely to-night."

"You think so, Bob?"

"I wished we could pretend you were not the almighty Henry Carter's daughter—just one of the girls——"

"Why can't we, Bob? Let's pretend."

And then the day when he had been ordered to take her in the car to Henry's lawyer, and when they had kissed. . . .

Mabel looked hard at the distant figure on the stage. He didn't seem like the same boy who had kissed her in the car, hardly four months ago. She sighed. He had kissed her, but she never knew whether he really cared for her or not. Sometimes she thought he did, but kept himself away from her out of pride, because she had money and he hadn't. And then again she felt that he was only polite to her and cared for nothing but his singing. "We are hatching a future

Caruso in our accounting department," said Henry, teasing him. Sometimes she was so discouraged and exasperated that she took her hunter Stormy Weather over the most difficult hurdles, hoping that she would have a bad spill and break her neck. Everything was such a hopeless mess. Even if Bob did love her, she could never marry him—or could she? Now supposing he made a sensational success to-night, would that change matters? Why must Henry be such a snob, wanting to break into the Johnson family? she thought sadly.

Mabel gave another deep sigh and concentrated on the stage once more. Peter too stared at the stage whereby now Carmen had been arrested after a fight with another cigarette girl. He was a bit annoyed about Mabel; it was not like her to make such a fuss about this tenor, it was childish and immature and extremely irritating. I shouldn't have come with the Carter's to-night, he thought. I should have seen the performance all by myself. He had come down from Yale especially not to miss Kati Lanik's first performance and it made him nervous to be surrounded by watchful eyes. It was like sitting behind a prison wall and trying to look across it at The Woman He Loved. He had not seen her since that trip on their yacht and he wished that their first meeting after that long separation could have been different. He too tried to penetrate the barrier of make-up, the distance, the make-believe of the theatre which changed a person you knew and loved into somebody absolutely unreal and almost funny.

His father had watched him from a corner of his eye. Now he bent over and whispered to him: "Kati wants to see you during the big intermission."

"Who? When? What?" the boy said, completely baffled.

"After the second act," his father whispered.

"Thanks," muttered young Peter, flabbergasted; he didn't know what to think about this secret message. He looked at his father and, for the first time, it struck him how many

worried and ageing lines the last year had engraved on that familiar face. Compared with him, Henry Carter, who couldn't be much younger, looked as if he came from a different generation. But Carter, too, Handsome Henry, was worried to-night and Mabel, who loved her father with a strong, lenient and almost motherly affection, had noticed it the moment she had entered the box. "Anything wrong, Henry?" she asked him under her breath, pushing her chair closer to his. "No, not at all, Punk, not at all, my girl," he answered, slipping an easy smile over his face. "Is Marina making trouble again?" she asked and Henry hung his head. Marina was a young lady in the Metropolitan Ballet, the last in Henry's vast collection of favourites, and the most determined. The letters she wrote him and the things she told him were not far from being sheer blackmail. Henry Carter had been blackmailed before by pretty gold-diggers and had always taken it as a good joke, as something natural and to be expected. But Marina went a bit too far and Henry was very vulnerable just now. He could not afford to have a scandal break loose, which might ruin everything: Mabel's engagement and marriage with young Peter, the association between the ambitious Carters and the arrogant Johnsons, the crowning conclusion of a long climb up the social ladder.

Mabel gave her father a friendly and protecting pat and returned her attention to the stage. Just now she could not be bothered with Henry's silly little difficulties; why must he always get himself in some jam? She had to watch Bob Marsh. The moment the curtain came down and the applause began, she clapped frantically. She looked around proudly, for to her it seemed that all this cheering and hand-clapping centred around Bob. It was *his* opera, it was *his* success. It annoyed her when for three or four calls Kati Lanik came out all by herself to rake in the applause. Only after The Boys down there called for him, she returned the fifth time leading Bob out with her and letting him have a share of it.

Mabel went into a well-mannered and restrained frenzy: "Isn't he wonderful, isn't he marvellous, Henry, don't you think it's a great success? Pet, you've got to clap louder, let's get him out once more. There he is now, bravo, bravo, the poor lamb, how bewildered he looks. I think he is the best tenor the Met. has had for many years; will you see to it that they give him a fat contract, Henry? After all, he started in your office, aren't you proud of him?"

"Babble, babble, babble," young Peter thought glumly. "It's bad style, it's not like Punk." He too applauded, rather reluctantly. Just now he was not quite sure that Kati Lanik was the woman he loved. She looked so different with that untidy black wig and the sloppy way she swayed her hips. "Oh, women, women," twenty-three year old Peter Johnson thought moodily. He was tired of women and felt a sudden nostalgia for the company of men; his friends, his fraternity, his polo pony, his club for Political Education.

"There's Granny," he said, pointing down to the box on the opposite side of the diamond horse shoe. Henry Carter's box, acquired after a long and tenacious fight, was higher up, on the Grand Tier. "Shall we go and say helio to the old girl, Punk?"

"Yes, let's," Mabel answered. "Do you mind, Henry?"

"Go ahead, but don't keep my best girl too long away from me," Henry Carter called after Peter.

"Aren't our parents funny people?" Mabel said while they meandered through the crowd in the foyers and on the wide stairways. "Did you notice how your father and my father are playing cat and mouse? Poor Henry, he's afraid your father might learn something about his *affaires*—as if the whole town isn't talking about them. He is such a baby sometimes."

"And my father is just as afraid that your father might hear some rumour about our being broke. Well, it's a secret which no one knows, except the whole of Wall Street. And

to think that all this fine diplomacy is wasted on us two worthless individuals! All their subtle schemes for nothing. I wouldn't marry you for your money, not to save my life."

"Making you marry for money is a bit old-fashioned, isn't it? And a bit mean too. Considering how stuck-up your whole family is——"

"I don't care for money. It's money that makes the world such a filthy place. Save the bank? I wouldn't dream of it; let all the banks go to hell, I don't want to be a banker," he said with all the aplomb of a new convert.

"Are you a communist?" Mabel asked, slightly taken aback.

"No, but I am an anti-capitalist; we all are, our whole generation. You are an anti-capitalist yourself, Punk, even if you don't know it. You like fair play, don't you? You don't like people being suppressed and suffering and working in the mines and all that, and not even making enough money to keep their babies from starvation—or do you? Well, there you have it, you are an anti-capitalist even if your father forces you to drive in a Duesenberg."

Mabel thought this over. It had been in the Duesenberg that Bob Marsh had kissed her. "That's true," she said, "I could be just as happy in a little Ford—if the right person were riding with me. I could be happy in the subway if——"

She broke off again after a brief glance in Peter's face which had begun to cloud again. "Well, there we are," she added. "Both of us in love with the wrong party." Peter had told her that there was a woman in his life, but he had shut up like an oyster when asked for further details. His secrecy was rather irritating to Mabel.

"Maybe I could have fallen for you if you had been a poor girl," Peter said. "Poverty brings out the best in people and wealth ruins all finer instincts."

This sounded final, and Mabel wondered if all her finer

instincts were hopelessly doomed. Sometimes she felt her father's millions trailing after her with a big noise and clatter, as if she were a cat with a tin can tied to her tail. In fact, their short walk to Mrs. Johnson's box and their serious conversation had been frequently interrupted by the flashing bulbs of some Press photographers, by other members of the smart set and by a lot of people who simply stared at them. There were only three genuine platinum fox coats in the whole town and Mabel wore one of them.

"Look at that coat, how much wouldya say it's worth?" Papa Kalish, who had been in the fur business at some time in his career, asked his wife.

"How should I know? Five hundred dollars," Mamma Kalish ventured. They were just filing in again after having been to the corner drug store for a sandwich and a glass of milk. Papa's shirt had wilted considerably with the excitement of the first act, with trying to find Mike in the muddle of the stage, with bickering with Mamma and clapping wildly when the others clapped.

"Five hundred dollars!" Papa cried contemptuously. "And you want to be a good buyer! Seven thousand dollars that coat costs, if it costs a nickel. What do you say, Jake?"

"I don't know," Jake said cautiously, because he didn't like to take sides in the frequent skirmishes between Papa and Mamma Kalish. "It looks expensive to me; but I have read somewhere there are so many foxes in Canada now they are a drug on the market."

"Drug on the market yourself," Papa muttered angrily.

Olga, who had fallen into a dreamy silence ever since the beginning of the opera, pressed a hand to her heart. "It's going to start soon again," she said. "I hope I won't faint."

"What have *you* got to faint about?" Cora said. "If someone is going to faint it's me."

"Why, what's the matter now?" Papa asked belligerently.

"Nothing's the matter, I suppose. I am just feeling funny,"

Cora announced. "Go, take her home, Jake," Mamma Kalish ordered and Jake took his wife's arm to lead her away. Take her home? Leave the Theatre? Not she, not Cora. All four of them talking at the same time, the Kalish family returned to their seats high up, while Mabel and Peter proceeded down to the Johnson box.

Old Mrs. Johnson sat very stiffly in her box. She had fallen asleep again and only woke up when the curtain came down and the applause broke loose. Her forehead felt strangely hot after the unwanted nap she had taken, yet her hands were like ice. She sat very upright, exchanging a smile, a nod with other ladies in other boxes.

"Good evening, Granny, how are you?" Peter Johnson said, following Mabel into the box. "And all dressed-up!" I didn't know it was Gala night." The upright old lady was known to wear different sets of jewellery for different operas, according to her degree of esteem for a certain performance. The lights flickered in her tiara and caught little sparks in the false rubies and diamonds.

"For me it's always Gala night when Pierre Colin conducts," she answered. She was past all secrets, past all desires, past all pains. She scrutinized Mabel with cold eyes while she said a few friendly words to her. Mabel, for her part, always found it difficult to refrain from curtsying to this queenly old lady. Sometimes she wished wildly to be like that, so old, so stiff, so sure of herself and so calm. Sometimes she thought that it must be wonderful to be past all the confusions of her own age—but it took an awful long time of waiting before you were seventy. Sometimes again she wished to die young—and without pain if possible—because everything was so entangled, and to be in love hurt so much. But, then, she had to live and carry on for Henry's sake who needed her and it was all such a mess and no one to help her get things straight, not even Peter, her best friend.

"Let's have a cigarette and a breath of fresh air," she told

him as soon as they had left the box. It was very bright under the glass dome which jutted out over Broadway but Mabel's young face stood up well under the harsh light which drew deep lines on the features of the other women.

"Is she poor?" Punk asked abruptly. All the time in old Mrs. Johnson's box she had been chewing this question. "Is who poor?" Peter enquired. Sometimes it was not easy to follow the leaps and loops in Punk's mind. "She, the girl. You know, the girl you are in love with," she said impatiently.

"Oh—no, she isn't exactly poor, I think. But she works very hard. She is different—you wouldn't understand, Punk. She knows so much and she has the biggest heart of any human being I ever met. You see, she is a bit older than I am——"

"Older——?" Mabel said, consternated.

"Well, yes, maybe a few years. But I am getting older too, don't you see, and I was never the type who cares much for young debs anyway——"

"Give me a cigarette," Mabel said with great restraint. While the burning match flickered in the hollow of his hand, Peter Johnson was overcome by a sudden spell of confidence. He was on the brink of telling her everything about Kati and about Luxor and what he had said when he had kissed her in Cairo and what she had answered. But just as he was ready to open his heart and his mouth, Mabel turned away from him and started negotiations with an old woman who had crept by with a half-empty basket of very tired violets.

"Have you any money?" she asked him.

"What for?"

"Flowers," she said.

"What do you want them for?"

"Don't ask—pay," she said. "And don't tell Henry."

He was pretty mad with her at this moment, for he knew that she wanted the flowers for her tenor.

While Peter paid the old woman, embarrassed as he always felt when he came in close contact with poverty, Punk had produced her lipstick to scribble a few words on her programme, made Peter tip one of the ushers and sent them backstage to Robert Marsh.

"You look as if you would mind?" she said after a glance at Peter's face with the puckered brows and the frown on his forehead.

"I do mind. It's as childish an action as I have ever seen. There are limits to bad taste. There should be a law——"

"You are not jealous, are you?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Punk. Why should I be? You have your life and I have mine."

"Correct." She threw away the end of her cigarette. Somehow the evening didn't quite live up to her expectations. "Come on, let's get back," she said sullenly. In the foyer they ran into Henry.

"Been backstage, my pet?" Mabel asked him.

"No—not exactly," Handsome Henry lied.

"You aren't getting old?" she said and with a lenient smile she opened her evening bag, took out her handkerchief and wiped away from his lapels the powder which Marina's little paws had left there.

Slowly the audience came streaming back to their seats. The Boys had staunchly remained in their places; they were pleased with themselves and with Bob. O boy, when he really let go of those high notes, it was something! You know what, that stuff would make a swell movie, you bet it would. It wouldn't be such a bad idea to go to the Met. once in a while; it's something different. Well, just wait, after to-night Bob'll give us all the free passes we want. Tell you what, they could do something during intermissions, they could

sell beer, do business. That girl, Carmen, was hot stuff. How she went after that guy. . . .

The orchestra pit was empty, for the musicians had gone out for a smoke and a chat, and their instruments, left on all the empty chairs, looked like neglected toys. Only Miss Tyne had remained to practise some bars of the third interlude; softly plunk-plunking, her fingers scurried over the strings, while she repeated again and again her brief conversation with him.

"Good evening."

"Good evening——"

"You are substituting for Mr. Bigliotti, aren't you?"

"Yes——"

"Ever played Carmen before?"

"Oh, yes——"

"If you could play the basses a bit louder—plum-plum——"

"Of course."

"And tune in a bit better. You are a bit flat, just the tiniest fraction."

"It's the weather—the strings give——"

"I know, I know. May I get your name?"

"Helen."

"Helen what?"

"Helen—Tyne."

"Well, so long, Miss Tyne. You are doing fine. Only the basses a bit louder. Thank you."

Miss Tyne turned every word around in her mind and looked at it from all angles; had he recognized her or hadn't he? Had he made up that about the basses not being loud enough just to have an excuse for coming over and talking to her? He had smiled at her. He had patted her shoulder. He had said "Thank you." Thank you.

The concert master came strolling into the pit, a fat, short, little man and an exceptionally fine musician. He picked

up his violin, dallied around a bit and finally came over to her.

"Nice to see you, Miss Tyne."

"Thanks. Nice to be here, Mr. Wolfe."

"And how have you been all the time?"

"Up and down. My mother has some internal trouble."

"I'm sorry to hear that. There's always some trouble in a family. My children had the measles, all four of them, but they are okay again. Well, I must be going. . . . Did you tune your harp a bit during the intermission? I think you were a bit flat, only a little bit, but, you know, the Maestro has sharp ears."

"It's the weather—the strings give."

"I see you have still the same, nice hair, Miss Tyne. It's good to see a head of hair for a change with all those bobbed girls around."

"Thanks, Mr. Wolfe."

Miss Tyne went on practising. She could have married Mr. Wolfe when he was a young obscure fiddler. She might to-day have had him for a husband and four children, but all she had was a pussy cat. Her sleeping heart gave a faint stir as she pictured herself with four sick children: pillows to straighten, hot little hands to hold, feverish brows to cool. She could have been Mrs. Wolfe to-day, if she had not been in love with Pierre at the time when Wolfe proposed to her. Three weeks of love. That would make a nice song hit. Three weeks of love. Was it worth it? Yes, it was worth it, Miss Tyne decided and began to tune her harp once more.

Backstage, the greater part of the first intermission was taken up by a row between Bhakaroff and Mike Stern, a row which had been due for some time. Bhakaroff despised Mike Stern. He treated him as if he were something unclean and evil-smelling. Mike, for his part, called Bhakaroff a dirty fascist, but Bhakaroff didn't even condescend to talk with Mike. He ignored Mike in a way that was most painful to

the little fellow. To-night, intoxicated by his own importance, Mike had decided that he would make Bhakaroff notice him. In his dressing-room, adjoining Bhakaroff's, he had sung Bhakaroff's whole part, so loud, so penetrating, with such an abundance of voice, that Bhakaroff could not pretend not to hear it. The inexhaustible stream of sound, reverberating bass-baritone which came through the thin wooden partition had slowly drilled into his nerves until he could stand it no longer. While Mike stern was on the stage for the first finale, Bhakaroff had gone up to the office of the chief manager, the monumental Mr. Certosa, and made a scene.

Bhakaroff's scenes were dreaded by the management, because they were so noiseless, so restrained and so utterly effective. He had demanded that Mike be removed from the floor where his own dressing-room was situated and transferred somewhere else. He had threatened to get nervous. When he was nervous he got hoarse, and when he got hoarse he could not go through with his part, and then the Met. might go and find another Escamillo in the middle of the performance. Thus, when Mike returned after the end of the first act, he found that his things had been moved to the upper floor and into another dressing-room which he had to share with an unpleasant Italian who sang the small part of Dancairo.

Mike felt that this was meant as an insult and he stormed straight into Bhakaroff's dressing-room to yell unfriendly remarks at him. "So my voice gets on your nerves, does it?" he shouted. "So the great Bhakaroff can't stand it when somebody has got more voice than he has? So the great Bhakaroff is jealous, eh?"

Bhakaroff, disturbed in the subtle and important process of being made-up, gave Slickum a little sign and Mike found himself gently but irresistibly urged from the room. Brooding over this new insult Mike made his way towards the

stage. For some reason he suddenly felt that his arch-enemy, Dr. Mayer, had something to do with all this; so, instead of saving his voice for the second act, he marched straight on to the stage and, in the midst of the turbulent changing of sets, he gave the stage director a piece of his mind.

Dr. Mayer stood with his back towards the curtain, watching the set being built. He too was nervous, because all during the first act little things had kept on going wrong. Carmen's style, her old-fashioned costume and all her antics were a sore point in this new and modern performance. The cigarette girls had completely disregarded his orders and lined up along the footlights, their eyes glued to Colin's *bâton*, instead of acting, fighting and moving. The lights had not changed from yellow to green at the right dramatic moment but several seconds too early. Through some inexcusable failing of the prop. men the rope to tie Carmen's hands had been missing and all through her scene Carmen had only pretended to be bound. As a final straw the curtain had come down a moment too late, leaving the people on the stage frozen stiff, as in a *tableau vivant*. And now, to crown it all, there came this nobody, Mike Stern, and made a scene.

Dr. Mayer hated Stern at least as bitterly as Mike hated him. Mayer was the descendant of an old patrician German family of scientists, philosophers, doctors and artists. He deplored Mike's type of Jew—the loud, common, commercial Jew, the Jew that was responsible for all the persecutions and suffering of a race which was extreme in its good qualities as well as its bad. The more Mike yelled and gesticulated the lower grew Dr. Mayer's voice; and the quieter his answers were, the more Mike felt insulted. In the end Dr. Mayer simply turned his back towards him and walked off. "Well, I'll show him, the dirty Jew, I'll show him," Mike called out for everyone to hear and then he marched back into his dressing-room to brood about revenge.

Somewhere at the back of the stage Joe Forest stood behind the long prop. table and tried for the third time to read the list of his props. and to check up whether he had everything ready. He felt badly about that rope that had been missing. God Almighty, he was only human. Twenty tin cups (on stage), he read again, four wine jugs (ditto). Carmen: castanets. Don José: sword. Frasquita: castanets. Mercedes: castanets. Six torches for torchbearers (Chorus). Escamillo: dagger. Don José: dagger. But this last was for the third act and only confused him. Again he began to read, still nervous and unable to puzzle it out. Twenty tin cups (on stage), four wine jugs (ditto)—props., props., always the same props. Cups and barrels and jugs for the drinking songs. Daggers, swords and pistols for the second *finale*. Crown and mace for kings. A cross and a wreath of flowers for those who died in the third act. And all of it just cardboard. Twenty wine cups (on stage). "They have taken her upstairs now, Joe, but the doctor says not to worry, they operate on hundreds of them appendixes. 'Everything will be okay,' says the doctor." "Yes, Nancy, but she is such a little thing, such a baby to be operated on, why don't they wait a bit longer, what's the hurry?" "But there's no time to lose, Joe, that's what the doctors say, that's just it: seems we should have called the doctor yesterday when she started crying." "So we called him too late, eh? So he has his excuse ready if anything goes wrong with that operation. Yes, operator, we are still talking." "Pull yourself together, Joe, nothing will go wrong, the nurse told me they take just as much trouble about the patients in the ward as about them first-class people." "That's what they tell you. I wished I could believe in God. I wished I could pray. Four wine jugs (ditto), castanets for Carmen—God; if you are there at all, don't let my baby die, can you hear me? Don't let her die, don't, God in heaven, please, please. . . ."

THE SECOND ACT

HAPPY and rather pleased with herself, Madame returned to her dressing-room. In her wake followed Slickum, carrying two bottles of champagne which she had commandeered from Sasha's Press reception and which were designed to serve some special purpose. The champagne was part of a plot she had worked out to make Don José, that stiff young American, function during their important love duet in the second act. The first act had been hers, so far. She had been in perfect voice and shape, she had pummelled her wooden-limbed partner around the stage and she had saved the situation when that rope had been missing. She had been very generous and taken him in front, giving him a share of the applause that was, of course, meant for her alone. She had found Woollie standing in the wings, had winked at her, patted her cheeks and whispered to her: "I'll make him a success, trust me." She was certain she could make him act and put a few sparks of life into his performance.

Slickum put the two bottles of champagne into her wash-basin and left the cold water running to keep them cool. She gave him a five-dollar tip; she always overtipped coloured people because they had such nice teeth. Then, humming happily, she changed quickly into her dance costume for the second act, rustling with all her silken ruffles and liking herself very well in it.

"Who's there?" she sang out when there was a knock at the door. It opened timidly and admitted Don José. "You sent for me, Madame?" he said, without entering. "Come in, come in," she said, "I want to talk to you."

Reluctantly he stepped into the feminine chaos of the room, trying not to notice all the lingerie, stockings, brassières and other intimate paraphernalia of Madame's toilette

which were strewn all over the floor, hanging limply on chairs and gushing from open trunks. "I'm sorry I made that blunder——" he said guiltily. "It's the first time I've sung this part and when the rope was missing——"

"Never mind, never mind, José. You were very good, really. Sit down, make yourself comfortable. Let's drink a glass of champagne to your success——"

She let the cork pop, found glasses, poured the champagne, said "Prosit" and gave him a slow smile across the rim of her glass while she drank it. Bob swallowed politely the unpleasant, sweet and fizzy stuff, hoping fervently that it would not harm his voice. Madame made him drink his glass to the bottom and filled it again. He had the impression that the room was very small and stuffy; Madame was very close to him all the time, perfumed, warm, rustling with the silk of her costume. He took a deep breath because he felt stifled. She smiled at him in the same slow manner as before. "Do you like my perfume?" she said, and before he knew what was happening she had taken a spray and squirted some of the stuff on to his hair. "I like your hair, José," she said and stroked it so lightly that it tickled. "It's like the coat of my black chow. I wonder if you have a black tongue too like he has," she said teasingly. The way she touched his hair gave him an unpleasant sensation at the back of his neck and he shivered. Madame watched him with interest and concentrated attention. "Let's drink," she said again.

Madame had a few theories, tested and long proved infallible. Theory number one was: Americans can only do Things when they are drunk. Theory number two: You sing much better when you are in love. Conclusion: If she wanted to keep her promise and help Don José to make good, she had to get him drunk and make him fall in love with her in a hurry, if only for this evening. Seven minutes of the fifteen-minute intermission had passed and she had to be on the stage right at the beginning of the second act. It was

the act for her duet with José and for his flower aria. If he failed in the aria there was no hope for him. Consequently there was not much time to lose and no wonder Madame employed rather direct methods.

"Let's go through the flower aria first," she said. "Maybe I could give you a few tips how to do it. Now, I am sitting on the chair, like this, and you are on your knees, like this. I have my hand here like this, and you have your arms around my hips, like this. Now, when you sing: '*Et dans la nuit je te voyais*——' you look up into my eyes; and don't forget to make a nice legato—'*la nuit*'—and then I bend down to you—but I don't kiss you, I come with my lips very close to you—but I don't kiss you. Not yet. I am drawing back, like this, and you sing: '*Carmen, je t'en prie.*' And now you bury your head in my lap, like this, come on, do it. So, now there is the applause after your aria, and I stroke your neck, stroke your shoulders, like this. But you must respond to it: shiver, do something, sigh, like you did before when I played with your hair. When the applause is over, I bend down and press my lips here, can you feel it? It's that kiss that makes you desert your regiment. Come on, let's do it once more and don't be so stiff. Let yourself go. Give, give, give. You love Carmen, José, you love me with an insane, deadly love. If you won't make the audience feel it in their own bones, you are no good. Come on, have another drink and then we'll go through the duet."

Somewhat dizzy Robert emerged from her embrace and got to his feet again. He had a faint idea what it was she wanted him to do and to feel, but he could not do it or feel it, not to save his life. He could not feel that she was Carmen and that he was Don José. To him she was Kati Lanik, an old prima donna of tempestuous manner and too much *chichi*. Wherever he touched her she was soft and yielding, as if she had never played any game in her life. There was too much of her; eyes, lips, skin, heaving bosom and clinging

arms, much too much for poor, embarrassed Robert Marsh. And he himself was a bum singer, with two left legs and ten thumbs and his *legato* was lousy; he knew it and she didn't have to rub it in. He drank another glass and it did not seem as sweet as the first and second one. After this third glass he was thirstier than before and he did not notice that he drank a fourth one. Then, very surprisingly, he got the *legato* right and he said eagerly: "Let's try it just once more." He drank the fifth glass behind his own back, but when she popped the second bottle open, he refused. "No, no, I hardly ever drink. Woollie thinks it's bad for the voice."

"Woollie drank like a fish herself," said Madame.

"Yes, and you can see where it got her," he answered, wondering at his own brightness and clarity of mind.

"A drop of champagne is exactly what's missing in your chemical composition, José. Don't you feel much better now? I must have drunk an ocean of champagne in my career and look at me: has it done me any harm?"

Bob looked at her. "But she is wonderful," he thought. Look at the old girl: the pep she still has; the tricks she knows; I bet she must have had lovers galore in her time. In fact, she must have been very beautiful twenty years ago. Look, now she's quivering all over, as if she really were Carmen. . . ."

There occurred something like lightning and a thunderbolt in his mind. "But this *is* Carmen," he thought: "I *am* Don José." It was a thought entirely new to the young singer. Up to now he had ploughed along strenuously, struggling with his technique, thinking of registers and how to place his voice and when to breathe and how to change from head to chest resonance. But now came a revelation! In one flash Madame, Carmen, the champagne and the opera, all turned into one flowing, rotating fiery ball of emotion: full of thirst and gratitude. He drank down another glass and then he threw himself once more into the duet, body and soul.

Three minutes before Madame was called to the stage,

Semper came into the dressing-room. The lights were turned off, except one, over which a pink chiffon scarf was thrown. The two bottles were empty and one glass was broken. Madame was sitting in the wicker chair and kissing Robert Marsh, who knelt in front of her and seemed to enjoy it. Semper cleared her throat.

"Can't you see we are rehearsing? What is it?" Madame asked sharply.

"Mussolini sent word that a man insists on seeing Madame," Semper reported.

"I have nothing to do with Mussolini," Madame answered. She had had a bad row with the Scala at Milan and she had been opposed to Fascism ever since.

"It's not that Mussolini. It's our Mussolini," Semper said. Only then Madame remembered that Mussolini was the doorman's nickname, because he was an Italian and a dictator. She began to laugh at herself. "A man? What man?" she asked. Suddenly she gasped and became very serious. Antony! she thought.

"What's his name?"

"Durham," Semper said.

The happy tension on Madame's face slackened. "Durham? Never heard the name," she said. "Send him away."

"But——" said Semper.

"*Yeshishmareea*, can't you understand English? Send him away," Madame shouted. Semper shrugged her shoulders and closed her lips firmly. She could have told Madame that Durham was the name of the man she had so frantically searched over the telephone and wheedled into visiting her during the performance. But Semper had a grouch against Madame, partly because she had brought her nothing from Europe but a useless bottle of patent medicine and partly because, to her taste, there was too much traffic in Madame's dressing-room. A dressing-room was a dressing-room and not a place to receive gentlemen and to make love. Semper

snatched off the pink chiffon, switched on the other lights and left without another word. Madame's mood had changed abruptly. She looked around. The hard light, the untidy room, the empty bottles, the open trunks and in the midst of it all that clumsy young American. "*Bibets*," she thought. "Idiot. Bungler. Why did she take all that trouble to get a spark out of a good-for-nothing beginner? I am too kind, people are always taking advantage of me," she thought infuriated. She encountered her own reflection in the mirror. *Boje Mooy*, she thought in a panic. I look like eighty. I'll have to make up again. Why can't they leave me alone? I must concentrate, I need a rest.

"You have to leave me alone now," she said. "I must concentrate."

"I am going," sang Don José. "I am flying, I am riding on clouds. Thank you, thank you for everything, thank you. Don't think that I am drunk, I am just elated. Elated, that's the word. Elated. Woollie will be surprised. *Au revoir. Auf Wiedersehen. A rivederci.*"

He was gone and Madame returned to her mirror. A knock at the door. "Madame Lanik on the stage."

"Coming!" she sang out and took the Spanish shawl. Between the dressing-table and the door she stopped in her tracks. "Durham——" she said aloud. "Durham! Cyril Durham! *Yeshishmareeal!*"

The next moment she was seen galloping down the staircase, racing into Mussolini's box, yelling at the tyrant who yelled back at her, pushing a few loafing people aside, gaining the street and running after a man, who was about to disappear in the crowd which thronged the nightly pavement.

"Are you Cyril Durham?" she said, completely out of breath, when she had caught up with him, just before he could cross Seventh Avenue.

"Beg your pardon?" said the man.

"Are you Cyril Durham? I am Kati Lanik."

The man took in her whole appearance : the black wig, the grease paint, the costume of a Spanish dancer, the blazing shawl, the high comb, the expressive hands, the hundred upswept wrinkles in her face and all this in the midst of crowded Fortieth Street.

"Very pleased to meet you. I am Cyril Durham," he said. They stared at each other for another moment and then they burst into laughter, both of them. He took off his coat, wrapped her into it, and said: "Where can I take you?"

"I must run," she said.

"Okay, let's run," he answered, putting his arm under her elbow.

When the signals for the beginning of the second act flashed through the house and Sybil was at last in her dressing-room, she took a deep breath of relief. Thank heavens, the tapirs had left. Sasha was in the process of being dressed by Slickum and would not want to see her before his big scene. The trunk with her costumes was packed and ready to be taken to the boat. The ensemble with the blue fox seemed to look expectant, disturbed and yet limp with fatigue as she hung it on the rack in the corner. She felt like that herself; excited yet tired. She would wear it to-night with the blue fox jacket which Sasha had given her as a wedding gift. There would be more reporters, more photographers, more publicity, more fuss on the *Normandie*. Naggy had gone ahead to arrange everything. Leaving the States and going to Europe with Bhakaroff was always such a muddle. She knew it because she had followed him for five years from one continent to the other in order to keep her studies uninterrupted. For five years she had been an unimportant shadow, trailing after the great man. To-night, for the first time, her departure was headline stuff too. She had made a name of her own during this season. I wish it

were all over, she thought. She took another deep breath, went to the wash-basin and splashed a spongeful of tepid water into her face. There was a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" she called.

"It's me," someone called back.

Bob—she thought and with an instinctive gesture drew her wrapper tighter. "You can't come in now," she called nervously.

The door opened and admitted Robert Marsh. "Thank you," he said and marched into the room.

Bob was a changed man, fierce and furious looking, and somehow giving the impression of a blazing fire, a flood, something elemental and irresistible. Madame's champagne had taken effect and catapulted him straight into this dressing-room and in front of Sybil Olivier.

"I love you," he said. "I love you, Sybil. I must tell you this before it's too late. I love you."

"I think you'd better go; I must dress——" she said feebly.

"No, I won't go. I was a coward, Bunny, but I am no coward any more. No more fumbling, no more lying. I am sick of pretending that I am your pal. I am not your pal, Bunny, I love you. God Almighty, how I love you. I want you, all of you—can you hear me, all of you."

"Yes, I can hear you," Sybil said and now she got mad too. "You don't have to shout it from the roofs. You had better save your voice for your part, don't you think? I don't like being forced to listen to things I don't want to hear."

Bob took another step towards her, but something in the expression of her face made him stop short. "Bunny," he said, very gently now. "Sybil, darling, I love you, I love you so much that it hurts. I wake up in the middle of the night. I can't sleep. I have to think of you. I can't work or study or do anything. I am running in circles like one of those crazy white mice in their cages. I don't care a damn

about my part, I don't care about anything but you. I love you and you must know it, you must."

"Don't you think you've chosen the wrong moment," Sybil said, trying to stay as angry as she had been just a moment before. "Why did you have to tell me about it?" she asked urgently. "Why did you have to spoil it? I knew it all the time, why talk about it?"

There were still drops of water on her face. In his light-headed and extraordinary condition it seemed to Bob that he had never seen anything as lovely as those drops of clear water on Sybil's clear skin. He feared and hoped that she would cry again so that he could take her in his arms once more. But she did nothing of the sort. She kept on looking into his face very straight now and very angry.

"Don't you see we must talk about it, Bunny?" he said. "What sort of a sop do you think I am? Do you think I'd let you go off with another man when I love you and you——"

He broke off and stared at her. "You *do* love me, don't you?" he finished, gentle as a cherub. She began to smile as she took his hand and tried to twist the little ring round his finger. "It's very tight," she whispered. As Bob was tall and Sybil small, he saw for the next minute nothing but her hair. He raised his hand after she let go of it and began to stroke her head. It was amazing how much smaller and lighter his hands had become since his rehearsal with Madame. It was not difficult at all to caress Sybil's lovely, lovely hair. It smelled like a summer evening after the rain or like freshly-cut grass. While he stroked it and breathed into it, long, happy vistas stretched before his mind: he and Bunny driving the car he would save for from his salary; he and Bunny having breakfast on a terrace which overlooked some lake (this was derived from a travel-folder of Lake Louise); he and Bunny dragging a hose along a path and watering the flower borders in their own garden; he and Bunny looking at the fountains on the Place de la Concorde.

(This, too, from a travel-folder.) It was a relief to dream moisture and freshness and the sweet smell of the outside world into the stuffy, dusty rooms of the Metropolitan, where shrubs were made of paper and trees of cardboard and people of wigs and glue and layers of grease paint. Also, it was a sane reaction after the gallons of musk perfume he had inhaled in Madame's experienced coaching. He travelled happily and very far during that silent minute while Sybil stood before him with downcast eyes and he stroked her hair. But then he returned with a hard bump to reality and began to quarrel once more.

"You can't sail to-night," he shouted at her. "I won't let you. I'll make a scene. You simply can't sail."

"And why not?" Sybil shouted back, and was sorry the next minute she had said it.

"Because you'll be just as unhappy as I am if I let you go."

"Don't worry, I shan't be unhappy. I have marvellous parts in Paris. Elsa in Lohengrin. I've always wanted to sing Elsa. And I love London in May. I'll sing Evchen in London. With Bruno Walter. You are crazy, you are mad as a hatter, Bob. Don't let's talk any more. *Fini. Basta.*"

"*Basta*," he said bitterly. "*Fini*. That's what you say. It's not *fini* for me and it won't be *fini* for you. You don't know what you are doing, Bunny. It is not much fun to be in love with one guy and to marry another, believe me. I thought all the time that it was the correct thing for me to stay away from you. Well, to-night I had a revelation. I knew I'd feel like hell if I didn't try to stop you. You love me and I love you and I won't let you go off with old ham-face, even if I have to knock him out. *Basta.*"

Sybil felt her heart rise up, through her throat and into her mouth, until it reached the tip of her tongue. She closed her eyes and clenched her fists and swallowed hard. It passed.

"But I don't love you, Bob," she said.

"Oh, no?"

"No."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Quite sure."

It was like the tensest moment of a wrestling match. It all depended which one of them could stand the painful, torturing grip a second longer. They glared at each other like watchful enemies. Then Bob turned his back to her and began to pace up and down the long and narrow room, hands crossed behind his back and eyes glued to the floor. Sybil drooped a bit when she was out of his sight; she felt all mangled and marred inside.

"Congratulations," he said, stopping at the window that led nowhere and staring out into the airshaft, filled with the night. "Congratulations, Sybil. You know what you want and you are going to get it. Silly of me to think only for a second that you could call off the whole show and do the decent thing. You get what you deserve——"

"Look at me," Sybil called sharply. "Turn around and look at me!"

Bob turned around and looked at her, reluctantly. There was a funny noise in his temples and he felt himself shaking with rage and pain.

"Why, it's all in the papers," he went on in a blind fury. "Think of all the nice publicity, and your career, and what not. Singing Elsa in Paris and Evchen in London; why, it's absolutely wonderful! Life is full of star sapphires and blue foxes for you, isn't it? It's well worth taking old Bhakaroff's kisses into the bargain, even if he has false teeth, even if he is a conceited, posing, pretentious old ham——"

The next thing that happened was a slap in his face. It came so quick and unexpected that it took him a few seconds to realize what the burning pain on his cheek meant. It meant a slap in his face, no more, no less. Strangely enough, it felt almost good. He stared at Sybil and she stared at him.

"Did I hurt you?" she whispered. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too," he whispered back.

"Listen to me," Sybil said. "Listen and don't say another word. Sasha is a very, very great artist and you know it. I am very fond of him—fonder than you will ever understand. He has been kind to me, kinder than anyone I know. He picked me up when I was right down; whatever I know and am, he has taught me. I—you—maybe if I had known you before I knew him, things might have turned out differently. As it is, I am engaged to be married to him, and if Bhakaroff wants me to be his wife I have to be very grateful and proud. And now you had better go. I must dress."

Bob opened his mouth and closed it again. He picked up his helmet which he had put down on the chair and went to the door. "Good-bye then, Bunny," he said almost inaudibly. "And good luck to you."

He opened the door, but he did not go. From the stage there came a melody, proud and fearless in the face of death, like a toreador marching into the arena. It was the sound of this voice, Bhakaroff's famous voice, it was the very perfection of art in the way he sang the toreador song, which brought his whole bitterness and disappointment down on Robert Marsh like a sledge hammer. He listened at the open door until the first verse of the song was over and applause broke loose. Then he closed the door and came back to Sybil.

"You are right," he said, and now he wanted to hurt her as much as she had hurt him. "He is a great artist. I have to humbly ask to be forgiven that I ever dared to raise my eyes to you. He is a great artist and he makes a thousand dollars an evening whereas I am a nobody, without a name or money. If I make good to-night I might get a four months' contract at three hundred and fifty bucks a month. And if I flop I'll have to crawl back on my belly to Carter & Carter and beg for a job and most probably I won't get it, because they have the place full of very efficient stamp-lickers at twenty-two a week. How in the world did I ever conceive

the crazy notion that you could love me? I am sorry I ever spoke to you at all, I am sorry for the day I ever set eyes on you. You are cold and calculating and you think you are doing the clever thing. Well, maybe your arithmetic isn't so good after all. Maybe you don't know that the great Bhakaroff has to transpose every darn piece that goes higher than an F. Maybe you can't hear the creaks and cracks in that magnificent structure? Watch out that your scheme doesn't come crashing down round your ears some day. He is a great man and very highly paid, and I am a poor punk who has plenty trouble to send a few dollars to his mother once in a while. Well, I'll tell you a secret. I'll be a good singer and I'll make a lot of money at a time when the great Bhakaroff will be down and out and forgotten. And then you'll be sorry you took the wrong guy. And now I wish you a very happy and successful marriage, Miss Olivier. It's been hell to know you. Good-bye."

"Wait," Sybil said, "wait a minute, Bob. I have listened to you and now you are going to listen to me. Sit down. Sit down and let me have my say. Don't interrupt, we have just a few minutes before you go on."

She pushed Robert down on the chair in front of her dressing-table and remained standing in front of him. When she began to speak he didn't look at her; he rubbed the spots on his white pants, he took his helmet and polished it with his sleeve, he pulled his boots up and touched his face to see whether his make-up was still correct. His heart might be broken and his soul trampled in the mud, but he had to get ready, to go on the stage and sing and do his stunt. After a while he forgot all about it, the helmet dropped from his lap and his eyes began to burn, his throat to smart and something big and hot began to swell inside his chest and to burst at last with a painful but entirely noiseless explosion.

"Six weeks ago I talked to Sasha's doctor," Sybil began. "He had asked Slickum to send someone who was close to

Bhakaroff. Slickum knew that Bhakaroff had no relatives and so he talked it over with me. You see, we both were very worried about Bhakaroff's eye. He has only one eye, the left one; the right one has been blind ever since he got a sabre wound on his head when he fought in the White Russian Army. No, you would not guess it, if you didn't know Sasha very well. What you call his poses and pretensions, I think, are the result of trying all his life to conceal this blind eye. Slickum noticed first that his left eye started to get weaker too. That was three years ago. Sasha, of course, never talked about it, but I think he must have been desperate and secretly he made the round of all the great eye specialists. Slickum found their bills in his mail. They tried this and that, very painful, cruel treatments; it hurts one even to think of it. Sometimes he believed that his sight had improved and then he was so happy, so hilarious, he would get drunk and crazy. And then he would trip somewhere or spill his glass or not recognise a face, and then he would fall into those desperate depressions and would not talk to anyone, just lock himself in and look at things, look at things and see less and less of them. He never mentioned it even by a single word; it was ghastly, because it made it so much harder for Slickum and me to help him find his way without letting him guess that we knew about his trouble. And then I talked to the doctor. There is no hope and no help, Bob. Sasha will be blind, and very soon too. If he were all that you think he is, it would be easy to break my word, let him sail alone and do as I please. As it is, there is no way out. Can you understand now that it is not star sapphires I am going to marry?"

"When did the doctor tell you? Six weeks ago?" Bob asked.

"Yes, on January sixth. I will never forget that date."

"Neither will I. On January seventh your engagement was announced in the papers, wasn't it?"

"Yes, I believe so——"

"I see," said Bob. "The day after. I see."

A few minutes before he had still been full of champagne, full of pluck and passion and fury and very, very sure of himself. Now he came hurtling down from his heights and landed sober and sad on hard ground.

"Does he know it himself?" he asked a minute later.

"I am not sure. I don't think so. But Slickum found a Braille book among his scores."

It is one of the hardest things in the world for a jealous man to be just about his rival. Bob tried very honestly. He even turned his head away and closed his eyes, trying to know what it meant to be blind. He opened them a moment later and still he did not know.

"Don't touch me," Sybil said. "Keep your hands to yourself. Put them into your pockets or something."

"Do you think it's fair of him to hold on to you?" he asked out of his crushing jealousy. "You could try to fight the great Bhakaroff, but you couldn't fight a poor, blind man. . . ."

"It's not a question of his being fair to me. It's not a question of my being fair to him," she answered simply.

There was a silence. Bob looked at her. "I hope I won't make an ass of myself, I hope I won't have to cry," he thought, straining every muscle, his fists, toes, jaw, to keep a hold on himself.

"You must go now, Bob," Sybil said gently.

"Yes, I guess I must be on any minute," he answered. "Sybil, my love, dear, dearest love, little Bunny, so brave, so straight, good-bye, good-bye. . . ."

There were only three steps between him and the door. He tried to get there but Sybil stood in his way. Suddenly he had her in his arms, his lips were upon her lips, upon her eyes, her temples, her hair, the hollow of her throat, everywhere; her hands clasped round his neck, her heart beating, drumming against his own ribs; a moment of insane happiness, a rainbow of colours, a roaring, blazing flight into heaven.

Then he stood outside the door, raced down the corridor and threw himself against the steel door. The moment it yielded he stumbled on to the stage, he heard the cue for his backstage-song. In the darkness of the wings somebody grabbed and pulled him, somebody pushed him, he stepped into eddies of whispering, pools of stillness. He missed the first two bars. He caught his breath. He steadied his knees. He opened his mouth.

"*Um Gotteswillen! Mensch,*" Dr. Mayer hissed into his ear. "Where have you been? What are you doing? Is this a theatre or a madhouse?"

The act was over. Madame bowed and smiled and bowed again. Her trembling hands were moist with perspiration, so were the hands of Bhakaroff and Marsh holding hers, left and right.

"*Du Patzer,*" Madame shouted hoarsely as soon as the curtain came down. "*Du Patzer, Schlemihl, Blbe.* That's what I get for being kind to you, that's what I get for singing with beginners who don't know their faces from their behinds! *Du Trampel,* get yourself a job as a barker in Coney Island, that's where you can holler as loud as you want. *Meiserny Blbe!*"

Robert, who had done nothing worse than sing to the best of his ability, mumbled flabbergasted: "But, Madame, I am sorry, I did everything you told me——"

This was not quite true. After the champagne, the scene with Sybil and their short and mad and heavenly embrace, after he had missed his cue, been cursed and pummelled and finally sent out on to the stage in a condition of complete emotional confusion, Bob had given vent to his feelings by letting go of his voice. There was more voice in him than he or anyone else had ever realized and, during a few clearer moments, he had been surprised at himself. He had discovered himself tearing around the stage, throwing Carmen

down to the floor in the big duet and responding violently to her advances during her dance and after his aria. The aria itself had made him soft and sentimental, for this aria is made of the same substance as love itself. There had been a sob in his throat, not a stage sob but a real one, because he was so full of feeling and so terribly sorry for Sybil and also a bit for himself. The house had exploded with applause after his aria and when the curtain came down they yelled and cheered for him. It was not pleasant for Madame to have another name shouted into her face when she went out for a bow. She would not have minded so much, if Marsh had not made life so miserable for her. Trying to sing a duet with this American steam whistle was like trying to sing louder than Niagara Falls. He had tired her out, he had ruined her act for her, he had left her without voice and breath in the end. When it came to the finale her voice had simply given out. Instead of leading and lifting it up with a victorious high C she had made a little apologetic gesture of despair towards the conductor and—although she had opened her mouth and pretended to sing—no sound had emerged from her exhausted throat.

A new cyclone was approaching the scene of disaster in the person of Pierre Colin, who came tearing from the subterranean realms of the pit on to the stage.

"Never again," he called in French, "*jamais de ma vie*, never again do I conduct when you sing, Kati. That was the last straw. To spoil the finale. Leave out the high C! You know what you are? An amateur, a confounded, irresponsible, detestable amateur. . . ."

He went on calling her names in different languages, reminding her of the time in Salzburg in '26 when she had bungled the letter duet in "Le Nozze di Figaro" and the time she had almost brought down the curtain in "Aïda" because she had missed her entrance in the second act.

The little group was flanked by Dr. Mayer on the one

side and Bhakaroff on the other. Mayer implored them to clear the stage because they had to change the set; parts of the decoration came down, went up, toppled over, or marched across it in all directions. Bhakaroff, on his part, listened with amusement and kindled the flames by throwing in such impartial remarks as "He can't help it that his voice is so big, Kati." "There are many shades and hues between making noises in your throat and the art of singing, my boy." "I would not call her an amateur, Maestro, even if she has the temperament of one." Suddenly Madame stopped shouting and abruptly fell into a muffled whispering. "I am getting hoarse. Send for the doctor. I can't go on like this. I hope you have an understudy. You'll have to pardon me, I cannot speak another word."

Now the onlookers of the fierce spectacle emerged from the wings to lead their charges away. Slickum piloted Bhakaroff through the bedlam of stagehands, cables, wings and props. Woollie pulled Bob with her, pouring a shower of praise and criticism over him. Margot Colin wrapped her husband into his coat and took him to his room. And Dr. Mayer wiped his face and returned to the business of getting the stage prepared for the third act.

Madame, followed by Semper who carried her castanets, her fan and the slippers she had kicked off, wandered to her dressing-room. She relieved herself in a flood of highly profane Czech as she rumbled into her room and slammed the door behind her.

"At last!" Cyril Durham said, and got up from the wicker chair.

"Oh——" said Madame with a gasp. During her painful wrestling with Don José, which people called a duet, she had, of course, entirely forgotten Katzerl's husband, whom she had parked here before the act began. And here he was life-size, and the twenty-five minutes of the big intermission was all the time she had to save Katzerl's marriage.

"Semper, my angel," she said, "see whether you could dig up another bottle of champagne and let no one disturb me, you understand, no one, I am having a very important conference with Mr. Durham. It is a matter of life and death and I want no idiotic interruptions. Here——" she said in one of her kind impulses, when she noted the wrinkles around Semper's aggrieved mouth. "Here, I give it to you, you always liked it, I remember." She took off her clanking golden Gypsy necklace and clasped it around Semper's neck; it immediately gave Semper the look of one of those absurd horses on a merry-go-round. She smiled, thanked her mistress and bustled off. Cyril gleefully watched the little scene, his hands in his pockets, rocking on the wicker chair. "Does it disturb you if I smoke?" he asked.

"Of course, it does," thought Madame. "No, not at all," she said. It was another sacrifice on the altar of motherly affection.

"Turn round," she said. "We can have out little chat while I am changing."

"I am not prudish," Cyril answered insolently and without moving. "You go ahead with your change and I'll watch every bit of it. That's been my dream ever since I was a boy."

"*Tiens*," Madame said and began tearing off her dress. He talked her language and was one of her own kind and they were old friends already. Besides, there was a very nice black slip under the dress, which showed off her figure beautifully. "And has your dream come true?" she asked.

"It's coming true just now," he said, lazily picking up the dress after she had stepped out of it. He hung it on to a hook near the door where it belonged, scrutinized for a moment the other costumes hanging there, picked the right one out and brought it over. "You should wear a lot of cold colours, blues, greys and watery greens. It would bring out much better the warm tones of your skin," he said.

"What do you know about my skin?" Madame asked laughingly. "I am all make-up and no skin."

"You have shoulders and I have eyes," he said and let his hand glide down her arm. It gave her a pleasant little shiver. He sat down on the chair again; the room became filled with the smell of his cigarette as he watched her through half-closed eyes. Madame needed to renew her make-up, but she decided not to do it. It was a most unbecoming process, and anyhow the next scene was played in the dark. Instead she stretched her long legs and began to pull on the boots she wore for the smuggler act. "Now, let's talk," he agreed. "What do you want me to talk about?"

"About Katzerl—I mean, about Goopy," Madame said, forging ahead.

Cyril waved the suggestion aside with a nonchalant gesture of his right hand. He had exceptionally nice hands, slender yet strong, Madame discovered. How in heaven did he ever fall for my poor Katzerl, she thought.

"Shall I tell you how many years I have been in love with you?" he remarked and like everything else he said, it sounded as if he was making fun of himself. "I saw you first in Salome, that was, let me see, 1931."

"No, 1932," said Madame. "It was a good performance, wasn't it?"

"I was absolutely mad about you for a while. I cut out your picture from a magazine and pinned it over my bed. I ditched my work so as not to miss a single evening when you sang. I had all sorts of dreams about you. I suppose it was a very adolescent reaction. Do you mind my telling you?"

Madame threw a hasty glance at her watch. Five minutes gone and not a word about Katzerl. "Don't let's talk about me. I told you it is about Katzerl—Goopy, I mean."

"Yes, I know," he said and threw his cigarette away. "I cannot tell you what it felt like, when I heard you over the telephone to-night. Bless Goopy, it's the greatest thrill she has ever given me."

"How did you meet her? I mean, how did you come to

marry her?" Madame could hear the doubt in her own voice and added hastily: "You are in love with her still, I hope."

"That's too big a word," he said. "Have you ever been in Hawaii? They have something like twenty thousand varieties of hibiscus there, it's all different and all hibiscus. Well, it's the same with love. Yes, I suppose in a way I love her."

"But you want to leave her?" Madame said.

"Ah, that's something different. It is impossible to live with Goopy. She has no sense of humour."

"No, she hasn't," Madame thought with regret. A ghost wandered through the room, faint, frail and timid. A frightened, nervous boy in a lieutenant's uniform and with Katzerl's deep, sad, enormous eyes.

"Why did you marry her? Did she have more humour then?"

"Why did I? I have asked the same thing of myself several times since. I had singed my wings considerably just before I met her. I was all sore and bruised. I don't know whether you know that condition. I needed a nurse and Goopy looked like one. She lacked all the things the other lady had possessed in such abundance. Law of contrasts. I suppose I wanted to be the Prince to awaken the sleeping beauty. But I got myself all scratched by the thorns and the beauty just kept on sleeping."

"It's always the man's fault," Madame said wisely. She had, in the meantime, put on her costume for the next act, short skirt, blouse, and bolero, and wound a cloth around her head. Cyril had assisted her with a few lazy, languid and extremely efficient movements. She had known him all her life, him or his like. The door opened and admitted first a bucket with ice and a bottle of champagne and then Semper who carried it in front of her stomach.

"Thank you, angel," Madame said sweetly. "Pour yourself a glass too and then try and get a few evening papers for me. I want to see how the stock market is doing."

This was an absolute lie and Semper knew it. Madame wanted to see whether the pictures taken of her delayed arrival were in the evening papers. She pursed her lips and took a stand in the door.

"There's a man wants to see you," she said glumly.

"What man?"

"A gentleman. Looks nice, too."

"How did he get backstage?"

"That I don't know. He says he has an appointment with you."

Madame's knees grew weak for a moment. Antony, she thought. He's come after all. "Did he say his name?" she asked feebly.

"He did, but it sounded as if he was just joking. He calls himself Rameses the Second. He said just to say: Rameses the Second to see you. He said to say just: Cairo, Mena House."

Madame slackened with disappointment. Old Johnson again, she thought; as if I had time to spend this precious intermission listening to more of Peter's complaints. "Tell him I'm busy," she said.

"Yes, but——" Semper stalled.

"Go, tell him. What are you waiting for?" Madame sang in her most gentle voice. "Go, angel, get me the evening papers."

"Go and look at the album," said Cyril after Semper had disappeared.

"What's that?" Madame asked, handing him his glass.

"That's what Goopy calls it. When she was a little girl and her mother wanted to talk to her friends, she was always sent away: Go and look at the album."

Madame was amused. "And you say she has no sense of humour," she said. "I think Katzerl can be very funny."

"Do you know her well?"

"Quite well——" said Madame.

"Then I don't have to explain so much. She is so full of inhibitions, her soul is a junkyard of bent and broken and

twisted things. You always feel sorry for her. But feeling sorry is not the right emotion between a man and a woman. Goopy was nipped in the bud. She had the most awful childhood, she must have been the most lonely, stumbling little creature on earth. No father, no mother, no friends, no joy. It sounds very touching when you hear it the first time. Of course, when you hear it every day it gets a bit tedious. If you ever tried to marry a case of neurotic trauma you will know what I mean."

"But she's had a mother," Madame said. She had heard nothing else.

"Yes, a horrible mother, I gathered from Goopy's stories. The best she could do was to die young and let Goopy grope her way alone. It is tough luck Goopy met me. She would make a perfect wife for some clergyman, especially a widower, with a slight spot of T.B."

"I knew Katzerl's mother. She was my best friend. She had her shortcomings but she was a nice woman. You would have liked her. She was not a bit like Katzerl," Madame said, full of defiance and hurt self-esteem.

Cyril looked at her in languid amazement. "That's remarkable," he said. "It never occurred to me. Of course, if Goopy hated her as she does, she might have been very nice. Goopy always hates the people I like. What was she like? Pretty? Fast? Vulgar? I like a dash of vulgarity in women, it's like a whiff of garlic in spaghetti."

"She was more—more like I am," Madame said modestly.

After this there was a silence, while she fumbled with her big Spanish hat and he watched her, sipping his champagne.

"Come to think of it," he said, "when I saw Goopy for the first time she reminded me of you. Sounds ridiculous, I know, yet there was something—I don't know what, especially when she smiled. She smiles very rarely, you know. The shape of her teeth, I suppose; it must be the Slavic race or something——"

Madame had great pain not to tell him at this very moment that Katzerl was her child. But she felt like a tight-rope walker, balancing precariously on the rope, with an umbrella in one hand and a bicycle in the other. She had to save Katzerl's happiness before midnight and one wrong step might spoil everything. So far, she felt, she had made good headway with Cyril. She was mad at Katzerl for saying nasty things about her and for not getting along with this perfectly charming husband of hers. He was great fun, and amusing men, as Madame knew, are very few and far between.

The door opened. Semper entered, put down a few papers, stood there for a moment and then withdrew ostentatiously. "I guess you don't want to see the doctor," she said before she closed the door and disappeared.

"*Entendez, donc,*" said Madame, who on the evening of French operas thought mostly in French. "I promised Katzerl that you would bring her breakfast to her bed tomorrow morning. Will you do it, if I beg you?"

"Definitely not. Goopy belongs to the tribe of grouchy-before-breakfast cannibals. It's rare in women and entirely inexcusable, because they don't have to shave. In fact, her before-breakfast-mood drove me away from home and bed. You can't imagine the fuss and unpleasantness that went on each morning during the last weeks before I left. It was as disgusting, revolting and unpleasant an exhibition of hysteria as you could ever imagine. Goopy is a case for the psychoanalyst and I will be damned if I ever enter her bedroom again. At any rate, not in the morning——"

Madame was aware of the faint silver lining in his last words. "Naturally she is not feeling well in the mornings," she said. "It's because of the baby."

"What baby?" Cyril asked.

"The baby. Yours. Katzerl's baby," Madame said.

Cyril got up, lighted another cigarette and kept the burning match in his fingers until it burnt them, while he looked

into the little flame with an odd, almost imperceptible smile. Then he threw it away, went to the bucket and poured himself another glass.

"So that's it. I didn't know it," he said.

"You didn't—but didn't she tell you?" Madame asked flabbergasted.

"Not she. Not Goopy," he said. "She would rather swallow her tongue than tell me such a thing."

Madame searched in his face for some sentimental emotion. She felt she had reached the psychological moment. "And will you go back to that proud little creature and take her in your arms and ask her to forgive you for being so blind," she said cajolingly. Cyril did not react to this frontal attack. Instead he said:

"I'd like to see your hair. Can't you take off that horrid wig for a moment?"

Madame hesitated. If she took it off, her hair might distract him as it had distracted men before. She took it off, together with the cloth she had wound around her head.

He examined it, closing one eye. "Hm," was all he said, and Madame put the wig on again.

"Did you ever watch Katzerl when she was asleep?" she asked him.

"Occasionally," he said. "I know what you want to tell me. But all females look so helpless and sweet and alluring when they are asleep——"

"Katzerl still sleeps with her thumbs tucked into her fists," Madame said. "D'you know what that means? It means that she is still a baby herself. You must help her. You must teach her. You must bring her out of herself. You must give her the shape you want. You are her man."

"You are lovely," Cyril answered. Madame didn't want to hear it at that moment.

"Will you try it once more?" she said. "Now that you

know about the baby you will understand her so much better. Will you bring her breakfast to-morrow morning?"

He kept on looking at her, absently and smiling. He looked rather insolent behind the blueish smoke of his cigarette.

"There is no train going back to Boston to-night," he said.

"I can get a car for you. Or, at least, you can take the first morning train. Poor Katzerl, she loves you so, and she will be so happy.

"I am going to have breakfast with you," Cyril announced. It was at this moment that Madame remembered Antony with a sharp pang of nostalgia. She must keep every minute she had after the performance for Antony. She had told him to call her up any time of the night or the early morning. She had told him that she had to see him before she left for San Francisco. She was not willing to give up her own life just to appease Katzerl's husband, charming as he might be.

"I am taking the morning 'plane to San Francisco," she said sternly.

"What time?"

"At eight and something."

"Where's the telephone?" he said.

"You can't get Katzerl yet," Madame answered watchfully. "She won't be home yet."

"Where's the telephone? It's important," he repeated.

"There is a telephone booth downstairs, just where you come in from Fortieth Street," she said reluctantly. Cyril disappeared whistling. Madame, the moment she was alone, pounced upon her dressing-table to renew her make-up. She had hardly finished it when Cyril returned, still whistling.

"It's all fixed," he said.

"With Katzerl?" Madame cried happily.

"No, with the airline. I am going to San Francisco with you."

This was going too far. "You are crazy," she hissed at him. "You are a married man and you belong to your wife.

I forbid you to go gallivanting around with me. I won't have you on the 'plane with me. I forbid you——"

"Sorry," he said, greatly amused. "I should have gone to San Francisco anyway, only I was too lazy. Flying is such a tedious business, not to mention blue-prints and talking people into letting me build their plant. But if you take me along everything will be different. You will give me wonderful inspirations and we'll have marvellous fun together in San Francisco. And you can preach to me and improve my morals and talk about Goopy and about my duties all the time. Let me have my little fling, will you? Maybe afterwards I will be more inclined to have another stab at matrimony."

"Are you always like this? Going off with any woman on the spur of the moment?" Madame asked. "If you are, I don't think that I want Senta to take you back." She was terribly sorry for Katzerl, and she called her Senta to give her words more weight.

"You are not 'any woman,' and I am not going off on the spur of the moment," Cyril stated. "I have gone stale and I need something to set me going again. I am a bit lonely too, don't you see? Getting married and then making a mess of it has not made me any happier and has not helped me to get new ideas either. I am an architect, I don't know if Goopy told you. My life is houses. Brick, concrete, steel, all the lovely materials to build houses with. I haven't designed a decent house ever since I married Goopy. I am dried up inside, and that is a most dangerous condition for a promising young architect. Flying to San Francisco is no sin and I assure you I have no designs on you. I have had so much common sense and correct behaviour and restrained emotions and This Is The Only Right Thing during the last four months that nothing can save me but a good dose of craziness. When you popped up on Seventh Avenue to-night, painted and in your costume, looking like nothing

on earth, it was like an apparition sent to me straight from heaven. You are absurd, you are superbly surrealistic and if *you* can't help me find my feet again, nobody can. If you don't like to fly in the same airplane with me, you'll have to hire a private machine. But I tell you right now, that if you let me down I will do terrible things and raise all sorts of hell. And then you and Goopy and her baby can see where all your moralizing has got you."

During this long and amazing speech the signals had begun to flicker, to bellow and to ring through the house. Madame threw another frantic glance at her watch. The intermission was almost over and things seemed hopelessly muddled up. She did a quick bit of thinking. As matters stood, to take him along to San Francisco and to work on him during the trip seemed the only way to get him back to Katzerl—eventually. Maybe she did not even need to take him all the way. Maybe she could send him back from Chicago. Or from Albuquerque. Or with the first return 'plane from 'Frisco. Possibly she would have to spend another evening with him after they arrived there, talk things over quietly and sensibly and give him a few tips how to handle the child. She saw herself in her blue lace dress, sitting opposite Cyril at a cosy little table for two. There was a lamp with a pink shade on that table and somewhere in the distance the band played a slow waltz. It was an entirely satisfactory picture. She would wear the little hat with the greyish-pink ribbons and the new evening cape——

"Well?" Cyril said.

"I have no mind for nonsense just now," she said hurriedly. "I have to go on in a minute. Stay here until after the act. No, don't stay here," she added hastily, as it had occurred to her that he might run into Antony. "Have a meal somewhere and come back around eleven o'clock. Maybe you'll have changed your mind by then. Now, clear out of here."

After he was gone, Madame drank the last glass of champagne left in the bottle and smiled at herself in the mirror. Her throat felt a bit dry after all the talking and she took the atomizer, opened her mouth wide and sprayed it. I have talked myself hoarse, she thought. I am ruining myself, and all for Katzerl's sake. She will never understand all the sacrifices her mother made for her.

Bhakaroff was alone in the room used for improvised rehearsals, waiting for Sybil. He had changed into the grey costume for the coming smuggler's act but he still had his monocle gripped into the socket of his right eye. He went in front of the old greenish mirror and attempted to look at his own reflection in the glass. When he turned his head slightly to the side he could see himself quite clearly, he thought. His black hair was slicked back with brilliantine, his face was square and strong and everything in it was big and strong too; the eyes, the nose, the mouth. In the part of Escamillo he did nothing to make himself look younger than his age, because his conception of the toreador had great resemblance to his conception of himself: a man in his forties with a trained body and a swift mind, and a brilliant matador in his own dangerous field. After he had studied himself long enough in the mirror and the picture there began to dissolve into blobs of black and grey and olive, he took the monocle off, closed his tired eye and rubbed the lid with two fingers, as had become his nervous habit during the last few months. Then, shielding it again with the small disc of glass, he turned to the table in the centre of the room. Bending over it he surveyed it with the same attention a general might give to the map of his future battlefield. There was a water bottle with two glasses on a tray. An evening paper someone had left behind. Two ashtrays for those who violated the rule which prohibited smoking backstage. The

one stood in the centre of the table, the other towards the left corner. Bhakaroff pushed it back a few inches, because it meant a dangerous obstacle. Lately such small and fragile objects had a confounded tendency to get in his way, be swept off by his elbow, clatter to the floor with great noise and break into splinters on which one might step without seeing them. There was a box of matches, half empty. He lifted it to his left eye, examined it with his fingers, and put it close to the ashtray. The edge of the shabby cloth on the table was torn and hung loose in a little loop. This too demanded attention, as it might get caught on the buttons of his sleeve, and cause endless confusion. Slowly he advanced towards the main object, the score of Carmen, which he had brought along to discuss with Sybil a certain detail of her great aria. He took off the monocle and tried to find the right page with the help of his fingers alone. He had made a little mark at the corner of it but now he got nervous, his hand was shaky and he missed the page. He put the monocle on once more, brought the refractory volume close to his eye, sighed, took the monocle off and tried it again. This time he succeeded. He rehearsed the little piece several times with the thoroughness and serious concentration which he devoted to his art alone. He rested for a few seconds with closed eyes from the strain, and then he proceeded to the next task. He had marked the bar in which Sybil had failed during the morning rehearsal; there was a thin line of pin-pricks piercing through the tiny black faces of the notes. This was easy to find if you had some experience in reading Braille. He smiled briefly and closed the score, putting it back on the table and placing it at a safe distance from the water bottle. He arranged one chair in front of the piano and another one so that it would be no problem to offer it to Sybil.

He sat down on the sofa and closed his eyes, returning into the restful blackness which soon would be his home

for good. Sometimes he was so afraid of it that he went off on a wild escapade, got senselessly drunk, spent nights and days in the shrill company of women who were so low that with them you did not have to take the pain of being ashamed or pretending that all was well. Then again, and quite often, he had periods when he felt that his eye was getting stronger and better, that all his fear was only foolishness, hypochondria, a reaction of overwrought nerves. And sometimes, as in this calm moment on the sofa, he loved the velvety soft darkness and almost wished he would soon be allowed to let himself sink into it and put an end to the daily strain of pretending to be a man with eyes to see. The darkness inside his lids was never empty. There were colours, pictures, faces, memories, things he loved, things that made him smile, things that were beautiful and desirable. He could call them at will and he did not have to look at anything he did not like. It was like sitting in a dark theatre and letting the screen of his life glide by. He had seen so much, he had so much to remember, enough to fill his eyes for the rest of his life. Also, he noticed, he had become much more sensitive to the invisible since his eyes were not what they used to be and he had trained his new sensitivity as best he could. His ears, always sharp and precise, now had a much wider scope in receiving distant sounds and detecting finer differences. The smell of things had taken on an entertaining and often exciting importance. And the touch of his fingers brought new messages and sensations to his entire being. It was as if his skin had developed hundreds and thousands of tiny microscopic eyes to replace the coarse and useless lenses in his pupils.

All the critics agreed that Bhakaroff had never before sung as he did in this present season. His art, his expression, his dramatic power which had always made him outstanding, had reached new heights. In writing about him they used all the adjectives and expressions usually reserved for the

description of some magnificent sunset. There is something final, almost tragic about perfection; although the music critics were not conscious of it, they felt that after this peak nothing could follow but descent, decline and the end. In some of his Russian moods, Bhakaroff, who liked to dramatize himself and to play interesting parts even when he was alone with his own soul, thought of himself as one of those fixed stars whose light shines strongest after they have been extinguished for countless years.

Waiting for Sybil was a tormenting pleasure, for Bhakaroff was in love. He had been in love often but never like this. Sybil, his child, his disciple, his companion, his pride, his youth, his lovely bride. Never before this last week had it occurred to him that anyone or anything might take her away from him. Sybil was his creation, she belonged to him; not even in his most depressed moods had he ever doubted that she would be supremely happy as his wife. He had given her the best part of himself, his knowledge and experience, his tenderness and protection, those regions of his heart which he had carried undamaged through all the adventures of his life. He filled his chest with air, expanding muscle after muscle, as for the long, unbroken, passionate sweep of a cantilena.

Far off, somewhere outside, Sybil said to somebody, "Don't worry, it will be all right." The sound travelled through all the manifold noises of the intermission and reached Bhakaroff's sensitive ears. He got up and went over to the table. When she entered he seemed engrossed in reading the paper. He looked up and smiled at her.

"You wanted to see me?" she said, smiling also.

"Yes, darling, I would like to go over those two bars once more; I was not quite satisfied with them in the morning rehearsal. You know the ones I mean? '*Mais j'ai beau faire la vaillante.*' You should not breathe twice. Only once, before the F sharp, and that should take you through as far as '*Au fond*'—and so on."

He put down the paper and Sybil came over to him and linked her arm into his. "How did you like our picture in the paper?" she said to please him. He eagerly swallowed the bait. "Not bad," he said, "not bad at all. Who would think that a little *gosse* like you could wear those hats that look like halos. Now, come on, let's do a bit of work."

He took the score, avoided the water bottle and the torn edge of the cloth, carried it to the piano, slammed the lid open, pulled up the chair for Sybil and opened the right page. "Here—*je dis, hélas*——" he said, pointing to the pin-pricked line. Then, as the whole succession of tricks had come off successfully, he played the accompaniment and relaxed. He did not need his eye to play the piano, any more than a well-trained typist looks at the keys of her machine.

They worked for about seven minutes, Bhakaroff, singing softly, showing her how to regulate her breath at the critical passage. Sybil was grateful for the improvised lesson which took her mind off other thoughts. She was a fanatical worker and she had a natural talent for singing. Soon the melody flowed smoothly and she felt herself happily flowing along with it. Her aria in the coming act, when Micaela follows the smugglers on their dangerous trail across the Pyrenees to tear Don José away from Carmen's fatal influence and make him return to his village and his mother—this aria was the climax of her part; it was, in fact, such an important aria that for the time being it loomed big in the foreground, while the parting from Robert, her marriage and all the complicated business of being young and in love and yet wanting to do the decent thing, became very small and seemed far away. "Thanks, Sasha, you are so kind to take so much trouble in the middle of your performance," she said and, lifting her face to him, she offered him her lips. He shook his head, smilingly. "Too much grease paint," he said, "and not enough time." He had the reputation of being a wild

and unbridled character, but he was oddly fastidious where Sybil was concerned. He glanced at the space above the door where he knew the clock to hang and said: "We are ten minutes behind. We shall be in a desperate hurry for the beat if this fellow Mayer is going to make up for lost time." He too disliked Dr. Mayer and his new-fangled sets which caused him so much hidden anxiety and trouble. The first intermission had been six minutes too long on account of Madame's flight to the street in pursuit of Cyril Durham.

Sybil followed his glance. The clock above the door had stopped. The hands on the fly-specked face pointed to a quarter to three.

"Yes, dear——" she said, her throat tightening with pity for him. He listened to the sound of the little word and then he listened into the silence of the room. There came no ticking from the mute clock. "I must learn to be more careful," he thought sadly. "If they don't even take the trouble to keep their clocks going, they will never learn to be on time," he said, smartly covering his slip.

"We don't have to stay for the curtain calls," Sybil said after an almost imperceptible pause. "We could save at least twenty minutes if we could leave right after your duet in the last act."

"Not stay for the calls?" Bhakaroff said in consternation. "But, child, it's our farewell performance. We might as well not sing at all. Not wait for the curtain calls! The very ideal!"

"But we don't want to miss the boat just to take our bow," Sybil pleaded; she had a fine voice and a smooth singing technique but she was not stage-struck. She was not obsessed, she had not that all-excluding passion for the stage which makes real life a shadowy affair, a pale interlude between acts and parts and performances.

"If we are late we simply drive to the boat in costume and make-up," Bhakaroff suggested.

"And the cameras? And the tapirs waiting on board?" Sybil said.

"*Tant mieux*," he answered gaily. "*Tant mieux*; it would be good publicity. Come on, don't get yourself all worked up, relax now, and don't make yourself nervous before the aria."

Sybil folded her hands in her lap, obediently trying to relax. He went to the table, poured a glass of water for her and brought it over, careful to avoid all cliffs and rocks on his walk of three steps. "Looks like castor oil," he said, "but it's good for your throat all the same."

He could not see the water, but he spoke from experience of many years in just such rehearsal rooms where tepid water was poured from just such bottles as the one he had victoriously put down on the tray again. He waited till she had gulped down some of it and took the glass back to the table. He found his cigarette case easily, as it was a bright golden reflex on the reddish table cloth, he lighted a cigarette and, all this executed with ease and sureness, he permitted himself to sit down on the sofa, take off the monocle and rub his eye-lids. Some faded photos of faded celebrities looked stiffly down at them from their old-fashioned frames.

"May I have one too?" Sybil asked hungrily as the room began to fill with the fine scent of the cigarette.

"Smoke before the aria?" he asked.

"My nerves are a bit on edge——" she answered.

"*Bon*—I'll let you have one little puff," he said, came over to her and put his own cigarette between her lips. Something in the groping little movement touched her and she bent forward and placed a light kiss upon his fingertips as he took the cigarette away from her again. "Well, well——" he said as if listening for something far away.

"You must have been a nurserymaid in one of your former incarnations," she said and smiled up at him. "Always fussing over me."

He did not answer and the little joke died in the air. Bhakaroff went to the wall at the far end of the room and looked at the old photos. "Don't they look funny?" he said, because he knew they did.

"Some of them are a scream," Sybil said. "I like best Isolde in a crinoline. Do you think we'll look like that to other singers fifty years from now?"

"Are you sure they will look at our picture," he asked, amused. "At yours anyway," she answered and made him smile still more.

"Did I ever tell you the story of Vreuwer's ashes?" he said; "I didn't? It's one of my best stories. You see, Vreuwer was a basso profundo, Dutch, not good, not bad, but a real trooper. He caught pneumonia and died within a few days, and there was not a soul in the world to claim dead Vreuwer. Finally the Met. found out that some of his brothers still lived in a village in Holland, and cabled them to ask what they should do with him. The brothers must have had the idea that Vreuwer had become a rich American and they cabled back: 'Cremate and send ashes, deduct expenses from money left and send rest along with ashes.' It so happened that Vreuwer did not leave a nickel but this was only found out after his ashes had been collected. There were cables and letters going back and forth. 'We paid for your brother's cremation and urn,' said the Metropolitan. 'Refund us the money and we'll send you what's left of him.'

"'You can keep the urn and the ashes,' replied the brothers. 'We are not so crazy as to send money to America for something we did not want in the first place.' And so the Met. was left with a cremated basso profundo on its hands. At first they did not know what to do with him, but finally they found a good place. He and his urn were put among the props. in the prop. room. I think he played in Orpheus and also in Titus after he was dead. Like to have a look at Vreuwer's urn some time?"

"How awful," Sybil said with a little shiver.

"I don't know," Bhakaroff said thoughtfully. "I would rather be buried in a prop. room than in a cemetery. I'd feel so much more at home——"

Sybil knew nothing to reply to this; she felt herself getting tense as the end of the big intermission came close. There was a short silence while Bhakaroff searched and found the ashtray and squashed out his cigarette.

"Sybil——" he said, from the other side of the table.

"Yes, Sasha?"

"You have not changed your mind about to-night? Say yes or no."

"What a silly question——"

"Say yes or no."

"No, Sasha," Sybil said.

He got up, came over to her and took her hands to lift them to his face and kiss them. Then he took off the monocle, turned her palms and bedded his eyes in their cool shell. Sybil's hands always grew cold before she sang, he knew. She pressed her fingers closer against his closed lids, wishing bitterly that she could do a miracle, make him see and be free again. "You've made life miserable for me," he murmured without lifting his head. "You've spoiled everything for me. Before I fell in love with you everything was fun. Now, I want nothing but you, *petite gamine*——"

The signals flashed through the house once more. Bhakaroff let go of Sybil's hands, "There's Slickum," he said, a moment before the door was opened and the dark head appeared in it.

"Mist' Bakrev, suh, Mist' Mayer ask will you want to look at them sets," he announced.

"I am coming," Bhakaroff said, took his monocle, kissed Sybil's hands once more, very formally this time, and went to the stage, discreetly piloted by Slickum.

The stage set of the smuggler act meant the fulfilment of a dream cherished by Dr. Mayer ever since he had decided to become a stage director. It was a daring and unusual set, menacing like the scenes which played in it. By building very high cliffs on both sides of the stage, Dr. Mayer had achieved the illusion that the floor in the centre was the bottom of a canyon, a deep and dark ravine. Of the footlights only some dim green and blue bulbs were turned on and from the left side a reflector threw shafts of a cold and threatening blue on to the trail over which the smugglers would creep at the beginning of the act. The rest was depth and blackness.

"You and your infernal dark stage," Bhakaroff grumbled as he stood at the foot of a makeshift stair which led steeply to the top of the rocks on the right. Dr. Mayer jumped around him in eager circles like a dog trying to please his moody master.

"That's why I asked you to try your way once more, Bhakaroff," he said. "I want you to feel absolutely safe. As soon as you come out on the stage I have a spot thrown directly at you, it will be as light as the day. Now, if you would step up here, and here, Max, you come along and use your flashlight——"

Max was the pimply-faced assistant who was on duty on the right side of the stage. Another equally pimply-faced young man supervised the left. In the first wing the stage manager played on a switchboard full of buttons, as complicated as the four manuals of a modern organ. He gave his signals to all the districts of this elaborate stage. There were two floors full of machinery beneath it, a maze of pipes and steel and scaffolds and mysterious devices, looking like the burrows of some diligent rabbits; above the stage the view was lost in the dim vistas of the first and second fly floor, where electricians balanced precariously, where spotlights went on and off, softly hissing, where way up, near

the gridiron, the unused prospects rested, wrapped around their heavy iron bars, looking like sleeping, bulging, satisfied serpents. "What a world," Dr. Mayer thought, "what a complicated, intricate world, an opera stage. So much machinery to produce such a small bit of magic——"

"If you will follow me, Mr. Bhakaroff——" he said submissively, as he pointed his torchlight towards the first step. "It's as solid as Gibraltar." Bhakaroff looked up where the end of the stairs led on to the top of the cardboard rock, so high-up it almost touched the catwalk.

"This is not a set, it's the Empire State Building," he said.

"Well, not exactly, Bhakaroff, but we are in the Pyrenees, aren't we?" Dr. Mayer coaxed and wheedled.

"I thought realism was *démodé*," Bhakaroff answered from the fifth step, which he had reached by now.

"True, Bhakaroff, very true. But these are not simply rocks, they are symbols. There is something foreboding in their height. It's a counterpoint to the card trio, you understand: the three small gypsy girls reading cards and Carmen's card repeating always the same: Death, death, death. These high, looming rocks too and the shades they throw over the scene—they too repeat it: Death, death, death," Dr. Mayer recited, speaking in French as he followed the great baritone up the steps.

Bhakaroff had fallen silent. He needed his full concentration to imprint every step on his mind. Actually the darkness did not disturb him, it was rather restful for his eye. He was no fool and he could see what effect the director wanted to achieve with the exaggerated height of the cliffs. Moreover, he was pleased with his entrance so far above the stage level. It made it important, it emphasized the drama, it gave him the opportunity for a good piece of acting. With rapt attention he followed the little spark of the torchlight, counting and calculating the number of steps, the distance from one to the next and the time it took him to reach the

place of his entrance. He still wore his monocle and it seemed to him that in the blue light he saw everything clear and distinct.

"You are standing here when you get your cue. Down there is Don José. Shot, Bang; Micaela: '*Ah! Mon Dieu! J'ai trop présumé de mon courage.*' . . . you step over here for your line: '*Quelques lignes plus bas et tout était fini.*' So then you leap across this gap, it's solid as you can see, and come down fast enough to be at the bottom for your: '*Eh là! doucement,*'" Dr. Mayer explained, turning himself successively into Micaela, Don José, the rifle, the report of the shot, the gap, the leap, the run and the arrival at the bottom. Bhakaroff hardly listened to him. In his mind he organized the difficult pass and descent. Fourteen steps up the stairs. Three steps sharp to the right. He stretched out his hands and examined the rock which would hide him from the audience until the moment of the shot. Two steps down straight towards the footlights and then stop. '*Quelques lignes plus bas. . .*' He took a deep breath and leaped, landed on an elastic mattress and straightened himself up. He had a very good control of his body, for he had been an expert fencer. He despised the sort of opera singers who looked like bags of flour and had to be dragged around the stage like such. Dr. Mayer applauded. Max, behind the rock, murmured in admiring whispers. "And now?" Bhakaroff thought fumblingly. "Come down fast enough to be at the bottom while he sings: '*Qui êtes-vous? répondez.*' . . ." Yes, but how?" He could not find his way, groping first to one side and then to the other.

"There are the steps, it's quite easy," Dr. Mayer called to him.

"Come here with your lamp, Max," Bhakaroff told the assistant. The small circle of light disclosed some structure he could not understand. He had to bend down and touch it, let his hands glide along the edges of three primitive steps. They smelled of freshly-cut wood, an alien and pleasant

smell amidst all the odours of dust and glue and paint. Bhakaroff made a mental sketch of these three steep steps, and, jumping from one to the other, he reached the stage floor. He had taken to the habit of wearing very thin-soled shoes so that his feet might find their way when his eyes refused to lead him. Now, as his toes received the familiar feeling of the boards with their slight slope towards the footlights, he felt safe and relieved. From then on things were simple, for his dagger-fight with Don José was well rehearsed and his exit through the centre was very easy. Dr. Mayer showed him further the place backstage in the left wing from where he had to sing his insolent and elegant *réprise* of the toreador song at the end of the third act, and then the whole demonstration was over. Step by step it had only taken three minutes, but Bhakaroff was exhausted from the excitement and concentration. It was the first time he had sung in this new *décor* because he had been in Europe when they re-staged the old opera and it was, of course, out of the question for the Met. to give him an opportunity to rehearse in it. In fact, he had rehearsed Carmen in the sets of 'Don Giovanni,' the opera which had been given as a *matinée* the same afternoon. "I hate to be a nuisance, but you must give me time and let me go over the whole thing once more," he said, cursing himself, his eyes, his part, the set, the Met. and this idiotic Dr. Mayer.

"We are eight minutes behind time as it is," said the German.

"*Tant pis, tant pis*," Bhakaroff replied. There was no more discussion as he took the assistant's arm and dragged him to the foot of the stairs again. This time he took off his monocle and put it into the pocket of his costume. In the dark he closed his eyes and tried to find his way independently of them. By now the entire chorus had taken its stand in the wings and Pierre Colin had appeared on the stage, nervously inquiring from no one in particular if this was an opera or

a funeral, and when Dr. Mayer would kindly consent to go on with the next act. "Fourteen steps," Bhakaroff thought. "Three steps sharp to the right." He stretched out his hand and there was the rock. "Two steps down and towards the footlights and then a step. Leap, Leap, you coward! Well done, Sasha." This time the smell of the pinewood led him the way down the three last steps. And there was the floor of the stage.

Bhakaroff opened his eyes and looked into the blue darkness. It was like swimming under water on a moonlit night. Although he could not see it, he could feel that there were many people around him on the stage, but they were strangely silent. He smiled towards a blueish-white shield suspended in the blackness, which he recognized as Pierre Colin's shirt front. "*Moi, je suis prêt, Pierrot,*" he announced into his direction. Then he made a sharp face about and marched off through the centre.

Sybil had been standing in the wings among the chorus, among all the people who had watched Sasha's precarious descent in such a heavy, breathless silence.

"I never believed it, but it's true," a big, middle-aged alto whispered behind her.

"I told you so, didn't I?" a thin, young soprano replied.

"Blind, *Madonna mia?*" an Italian tenor asked.

"Blind as a bat," Mike Stern's resounding bass voice concluded.

Sybil remained in the wings, a stiff little smile on her face. "Poor Sasha," she thought, "to-day they are only whispering it in the wings. Soon everybody will talk about it, it will be all over town, in all the newspapers, all over the world." She could almost see the headlines, screaming his pitiful secret into the streets. Poor, poor Sasha.

On the stage, Dr. Mayer clapped his hands. "Stage clear. On your places. Everything ready? Go! Curtain!"

The third act began.

THE THIRD ACT

THE third act began.

The smugglers had crept down the narrow trail across the Pyrenees, Carmen had quarrelled with Don José, the soldier who had deserted to follow her and become a smuggler like the Gypsies. She had told him to go back where he came from and he had threatened to kill her. Carmen and her two Gypsy friends had read the cards; love for the one, riches for the other. For Carmen : Death. The shadows of the high rocks had fallen on the scene, emphasizing its foreboding. Pierre Colin had conducted the *ensemble* with so much verve that a wave of applause had burst over the gratified and surprised chorus singers. They all left to lure the *douaniers* from their duties and only Don José had been told to take his post as a sentinel. He too had wandered off backstage to clear the stage for Micaela's big aria.

He had wandered off into a scene which seemed to him disgusting, ridiculous and abject, but which he could not help understanding after what Sybil had told him. Between the last wing and the backdrop Sybil stood with Bhakaroff, ready for her cue. Bhakaroff was just in the process of making a Russian cross over her forehead, shoulders and heart. Then he took her hands and kissed them, one after the other. Then—Robert saw it with a pang of jealousy—Sybil pressed her palms to Bhakaroff's eyes. Robert had to pass them in the narrow space that was left in the wings.

"Pardon me," he whispered soundlessly as he flattened himself against the backdrop. Sybil's eyes met his in the dim darkness. It seemed to him that she moved her lips as if saying something to him, but he was not sure of it. The next moment she had gone on the stage for her cue. The orchestra played the introduction to her recitative.

"*Scusi*," Bhakaroff said as he bumped into Bob. He had not recognized him but seemed to believe that he was one of the Italian chorus singers. Before Bob could say anything Bhakaroff had disappeared behind the backdrop and was gone.

Bhakaroff had decided to climb up the thirteen steps during Sybil's recitative in order to be at his post for his cue; he would have time to relax up there and he wanted to listen to her aria. He stumbled along, helpless without his monocle, until Slickum popped up at his side and took him across the stage. Slickum also found Max for him and Bhakaroff followed the little round reflex of the flash-light, step by step, reaching the place behind his rock just as Micaela's aria began. He felt with his hand for the cardboard rocks to make sure that he stood at the correct spot where he could not be seen from the audience. Then he relaxed, saving his energy for his own scene.

From his post way up there, Bhakaroff could not only listen, but also, in one of his rare moments of clear sight, see Sybil very well. Dr. Mayer had thrown a warm, golden spotlight on to the lonely little figure at the bottom of the canyon, lifting her from the surrounding blue darkness. Symbolic! Bhakaroff thought with a chuckle. He did not see Sybil with clearly defined lines but rather as a vision of light and beauty. Usually he listened to her with the utmost attention, watching out for every tiny flaw, very critical and rarely ever satisfied. He had created Sybil, and what artist is ever satisfied with his own creation? But to-night he surrendered himself to her voice, not critical like an expert but happy and relaxed and subtly intoxicated like anyone in the audience.

It was a moment of sublime happiness for Bhakaroff. Sybil sang beautifully; she looked marvellous too, frail and touchingly helpless, yet determined and gallant. Her movements were sparse, for Sybil was not much of an actress

and had inhibitions when it came to transmit her emotions into the sweeping, though meaningless, gestures of the opera. She would lift one hand and drop it again, lift her chin and turn her face up, not towards the galleries in the dark house but towards heaven. Her neck blossomed strong and straight from the dark shawl she wore around her shoulders. The spotlight conjured a golden halo around her blonde hair. There was confidence and determination in every line of this upturned little face, while her voice kept on streaming and soaring and sobbing, easy, without strain.

Doctor Mayer's cliffs were enormously effective in this scene. They made Micaela look so small, so lonely, so utterly valiant in her pursuit of the man she loved. The audience listened breathlessly. Bhakaroff, who knew audiences, could feel the tension in the house; it touched his temples like something tangible, like the first gust of a searing sirocco. She's got them, he thought jubilantly, to-night she's got them, she's got them all right. To 'get' an audience was a renewed fight in every performance, it was like wrestling with a big beast, getting at its throat and forcing it to obey. No one knew it better than Alexander Bhakaroff. Sybil had finished the middle part of the aria and the melody returned with an exquisite modulation to the repetition of the beginning. The *legato* there was an ever new delight to Bhakaroff and he had tormented Sybil with it until she had thrown herself on the carpet and burst into tears. To-night she had it. To-night everything was perfect. To-night Bhakaroff was happy, he had not been so happy for years. He bent forward in an effort to see her better yet, closer, clearer. Now he seemed to recognize every detail in her face, her hair, her vibrant nostrils of a thoroughbred, even the fine hollows beneath her high cheek bones. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a second. Sybil was still there. He could see her with closed eyes as clearly as he saw her with his eyes

open. He stored this picture of her away in his mind, for times to come. "I will always see Sybil," he felt more than he thought it, "always, always. I will see her, even when I'll be blind. But I will not be blind," he told himself. "I'm getting better, day by day. Doctors are quacks and imbeciles. They frighten you just to appear more important and send you bigger bills. Quickly he opened his eyes again. Yes, he saw Sybil.

The applause that came crashing down at the end of the aria awakened Bhakaroff from his spell of serene enchantment and brought him back to reality. Carmen, Third Act, and between him and his next scene were eleven feet of a difficult and insecure passage. While he braced himself for the coming task he automatically kept his attention on the applause, estimating its verve, warmth, duration and volume. He was pleased.

"Attention!" the little assistant whispered somewhere behind him. Two more bars of music, the recitative, the tremolo in the orchestra. Bhakaroff cleared his throat, filled himself with air, tapped against his forehead. It was a routine gesture, designed to draw the resonance into that precious cavity above the saddle of the nose. He put his right foot forward and straightened himself up, growing a few inches taller as he assumed the characteristic pose of a bullfighter. "Now! Go!" the whisper behind him commanded.

He stepped out of his hiding place the same moment as Don José aimed and shot. Bhakaroff opened his mouth for his cue: "*Quelques lignes plus bas et tout était fini.*" There was a hundredth of a second between the report of the rifle and the impact of something hot and painful and burning on his face. He made an instinctive, uncontrolled step to the side, groped for some hold, found nothing under his foot, nothing in his hands. He felt himself falling into what seemed an endless depth. He thought in a panic: I am shot; he's shot me. His head hit hard against some-

thing, he was still falling, he was dizzy now and somehow Sybil was mixed up in this dizziness and pain. He saw her again as he had seen her in the narrow, dim corridor; her head resting on the shoulder of that young American, his hands clasped around her. He tried hard not to see this, to get control of the situation, not to keep on falling. The orchestra played on and his cue was hopelessly missed and passed and gone. He strained his eyes, yet he saw nothing but streaks of darkness shooting past him. He's killed me, he thought furiously, and then his fall hurled him hard against the edge of the last three steps. He had landed head down, while his feet were caught by some piece of scenery. Still he could not see where he was but he recognized the smell of freshly cut wood. For a moment he let himself relax there, inhaling that pleasant smell. The blunt pain which stabbed through his entire body as he hit the edge of the wood ebbed away, leaving a throbbing, convulsive sensation in his chest, his temples or his legs. With a mad effort he unhooked his foot from the piece of cardboard where it had caught and tumbled down still further, until he came rolling on to the floor of the stage.

By now he understood that he had not been hit by a bullet, but had merely tripped and tumbled down the crazy set. He set his teeth, gave himself a sharp command and got to his feet. Still everything was reeling within him and there was this blunt pain which he could not locate. His heart felt faint, it pumped slowly, as if there were not enough pressure left in its intricate mechanism. He looked down to the conductor for support and his next cue. He had lost track of the music entirely and not a word or note was left in his memory.

What seemed to him an eternity of fumbling and stumbling and falling into the dark, had been only a few seconds to the rest of the world. The audience gasped when he came

rolling down from the high cliffs, but when he landed on the stage, sprang to his feet and turned against Don José, they presumed that this had been an effective and masterly piece of acting. Down in the pit Pierre Colin moved his expressive hands and opened wide his mouth to prompt Bhakaroff. Woollie, in the prompter's box, too, tapped frantic signals with her pencil and shouted the next line up to him, her face red with excitement, her head bobbing up and down in her small cubicle. And Robert Marsh, although he stood opposite Bhakaroff in the belligerent attitude prescribed by his part, looked deeply worried at him and whispered under his breath: "Did you hurt yourself?"

Bhakaroff gave no answer. He needed all his self-control to hold his breath and take the next cue. It was unfortunate that he could neither see Colin's prompting lips very clearly nor understand Woollie's suppressed shouting. There was a great noise in his head and clouds, jagged shreds of blackness, glided past his eyes. "*Escamillo; Je connais votre nom,*" Don José sang; "*Soyez le bienvenu.*" Bhakaroff braced himself, straightened up, brought his heels together, drew himself up from the waist, every inch a matador. "*Mais vraiment, camarade——*" Don José sang. The orchestra played on.

Ever since the rumour of Bhakaroff's failing eyesight had reached Pierre Colin, the conductor had used a little device to steer the great baritone through the perils of his performances. He had made Margot order for him a supply of shirts with sleeves that were inches too long. Pulling the French cuffs of these long sleeves almost down to his knuckles, Colin had hoped that Bhakaroff would be able to see the movements of the bright white stripes of linen, even if the *bâton* was too thin and quick for him. As Bhakaroff tried now to steady himself and to penetrate the dizzy darkness around him, it was Colin's cuffs that brought him around. He fastened his eyes on them, followed their imploring and commanding movements and suddenly his

memory opened up and released the next cue. He took another deep breath, he felt like coughing but gave himself another sharp command. He opened his mouth and began to sing.

Down in the pit a few of the musicians had got up from their seats to get a glimpse of the stage, as they usually did when something went wrong. Now they sat down again and went on fiddling. Everybody relaxed. Sybil, in the third wing, had been holding her breath, clenching her hands in the folds of her skirt. Now she too took a deep breath, and smiled with relief. From the next wing she heard Mike Stern's sonorous whisper. "Didn't I tell you? What did I say to you only yesterday? He is a gonner."

"Ils s'adoraient, mais c'est fini, je crois. Les amours de Carmen ne durent pas six mois." Bhakaroff could not hear his own voice, for there was something like cotton in his ears. Technique didn't matter now, nor did voice or acting or even success. The only thing he could attempt was to win through to the end of the act. He strained every nerve and muscle not to cave in while he went on with his part. There was yet an endless stretch of singing and acting to be done and he was afraid of it. No pain any more, just this feeling of fading out, this faint and insufficient effort of his heart to keep on beating, the black shreds driving by, the trouble it gave him to breathe. "Take it easy——" he whispered to Don José, as they both wrapped their capes around their wrists for their fight with the blunt stage daggers. "What happened?" Don José whispered back, attacking him at the same time with great ferocity. "I don't know. You must help me, please——" Bhakaroff whispered as he came up against him once more. It hit Robert between the eyes. It sounded so pitiful, coming from the great Bhakaroff.

The act went on, the chorus entered in great commotion, the two rivals were separated. Everybody moved up to

the footlights in the traditional approach of the finale. Bhakaroff staggered along with them, a dizzy ghost in a toreador's garb, trying to be debonair and elegant. Pierre Colin conducted, tense and exact, his whole attention focused on his star. They had been in many battles together and he had a great respect for Bhakaroff. If men of their kind could ever be capable of leaving their isolation and becoming another's friend, they might have been friends. In the wings, Dr. Mayer tore his thin, sandy hair and bit his nails. In his excitement he had reverted to German, which he let out in little moans and groans. Sybil stood next to him, ready for her cue, stiff with worry. Mike Stern's nasty comments could be heard everywhere. "The act he puts on about a little bump on the head! Nice wedding night the gal will have with him in that condition. Getting publicity even if it kills him."

The stage manager had telephoned to the office to report the mishap, and Mr. Certosa was descending from his Olympus. In the third row of the orchestra seats a short, grey-haired gentleman left his seat and tip-toed off. This was Dr. Benz, the Met.'s medical adviser, who fetched his bag from the cloak-room and went backstage to be ready, just in case.

Bhakaroff counted the bars. Now it was over soon. Now he could soon make his exit, sit down, wrap a hot towel around his head. He felt very cold by now, that was all. Somewhat tired and stiff and terribly, terribly cold. "Don't crack now," he told himself. "Go on, *allons*, you coward, there is nothing the matter with you——"

During his last few lines it was Carmen alone, Kati Lanik, who pulled him through. When she saw him swaying and groping for support, she was at his side at once; she put her arm around his waist with a strong grip but made it look like a coquettish gesture. She cuddled up to him, with her smile, her eyes, her entire body. "*Verfluchter, Kerl*, pull yourself together," she hissed at him, screwing

her nails into the back of his hand. The sharp little pain was like the prick of an injection. Bhakaroff straightened himself once more, and became himself for just one moment as he waved his hand to the chorus with nonchalant elegance. "*J'ai tout dit et n'ai plus qu'à faire mes adieux,*" he sang. The chorus made way for his exit. He should have walked off alone, royally, the king of the arena, the heart-throb of all women. Instead and to everybody's startled surprise, Carmen went with him. Madame felt him sag after his exit line; she held him up with her arm, walking with him down the stage and towards the left wings, where the set gave the illusion of a descending trail and where Slickum stood with a big glass of brandy in his reliable black hands.

For a few moments Robert Marsh fumbled helplessly as his Carmen was not where she was supposed to be. Then Madame took the end of the act in hand, while Micaela dragged Don José away from her, back to his mother, back to the little village and to all the virtues which he had deserted. The end of the act. There was a horrible second of silence when Escamillo was supposed to sing once more, backstage this time, and did not sing. Pierre Colin's hands and *bâton* hung arrested in the air. A stir in the audience, a stir on the stage. And then, rich, round, full, magnificent, a voice like black velvet rose from the wings and finished the act.

It was the voice of Mike Stern who had jumped into the breach when Alexander Bhakaroff fainted the moment he reached the strong refuge of Slickum's arms and shoulders.

As soon as the curtain was down, backstage turned into a jungle filled with fears and unknown dangers, a tangle of staring eyes, hidden voices, whispered perils. Rumours flared up in every nook and corner. "Did you see the doctor? He went to Bhakaroff's dressing-room and looked very serious. Did you know that Dr. Mayer was called into

the office and made responsible for everything? They say he had a frightful row with Mr. Certosa. They say he got fired, serves him right, the stuck-up foreigner. Well, he couldn't help it if Bhakaroff broke his neck. He didn't break his neck, he got shot. Who would shoot Bhakaroff? Robert Marsh, the young tenor, of course. He had an *affaire* with Sybil Olivier, everybody knows that, and he shot Bhakaroff to prevent their wedding to-night. Pretty smart, a well-staged accident, no one will be able to prove anything against him. Nonsense, how could he shoot him with a blank cartridge? It was no blank cartridge, he changed it and put a bullet in the rifle, can't you see? No, it was not Marsh who did it, it was Joe the prop. man. He made a mistake, that's all. His kid is on the operating table just now and he didn't know what he was doing, it's enough to drive a man crazy. They have put him through some kind of third degree and he broke down and cried. No, it was not Joe either, it was no bullet at all. Mike Stern tampered with the set and pried one of the steps loose, so Bhakaroff should get hurt and he would have his chance to sing the part. Do you know who the two men were who examined the set just now? Police, I am telling you. They searched every inch for a bullet or any other proof that the accident was caused intentionally. Well, did they find anything? No, not a thing. I am telling you there was no shooting and no dirty trick; he simply tripped and fell down. That's not very likely, you don't simply trip and fall down all the way, you hold on to something, don't you? Yes, I would and you would, but not Bhakaroff. He's blind, didn't you know that? He has been blind for years, everyone talked about it. Never heard such a thing, Good Gracious, why do they let a blind man go on the stage? The police should prohibit—quiet, here comes the girl now. How is he, Miss Oliver, what did the doctor say?"

"Thanks, he is quite okay, it's really nothing," Sybil

said, crossing the stage from the gentlemen's side towards her own dressing-room. "He is just a bit dizzy from the bump on his head, nothing to worry about. He'll be all right in a few minutes. Thank you."

She went on her way as Dr. Mayer cleared the stage and the Pyrenees came down to make room for the bull-fight arena of Seville. When she threw her weight against the stage door to open it, she bumped into somebody who had been standing at the other side.

"Hello——" Robert Marsh said. "Hello——" Sybil answered. They did not look at each other and there was an awkward silence. "How is he now?" Bob asked.

"Thanks, he's fine," she answered. "He is taking a little rest, getting in shape for the last act."

"Is there anything I could do for you?" Bob asked.

"Thank you, I don't think so," she answered politely.

"Well, then, good-bye," he said. "Good-bye and good luck."

"Good-bye," she said. "Good-bye, Bob."

"I suppose I won't see you any more after the performance?"

"I suppose not. It's getting quite late. We'll have to hurry if we want to catch the boat. We won't even have time to wait for the curtain calls."

"Well, good-bye then," he said again. It was not so easy to finish this last bit of conversation, leave this little haven behind the stage door, give up Sybil for ever.

"What's this—the spots on your coat? Blood?" she asked now and her hand touched his chest, light like a bird in flight.

"Blood?" he said amazed as he scrutinized the red spots on his costume. "But Bhakaroff was not bleeding. I don't—how——"

"Did you get hurt, too? Maybe during the fight?" she looked at him, serious and a bit worried. Suddenly she

began to laugh, a short, mirthless laugh. "No, it's not blood. It's lipstick," she said.

"Now, how could I get lipstick all over my coat?" Bob asked, flabbergasted. "I have not been near any girl——"

"Well, it's not so unusual for a young tenor who is a success," Sybil said. "And you are a success to-night. I am glad you are. You'll get used to having lipstick all over you."

There was nothing Bob could answer. "Where in hell did I get that lipstick on me?" he thought. He felt that he would take Sybil in his arms and kiss her once more if he remained another minute so close to her; yet he didn't know how to get away. A bulky dark shadow appearing through the door put an end to the tense situation.

"Yes, Slickum?" Sybil said.

"A jes' wants to see if your bags are ready to go to the boat," Slickum announced. "You better get dressed, Miss Sybil, an' get ev' thing ready an' packed."

"Right away, Slickum. How's Mr. Bhakaroff now?"

"Don't you worry, Miss Sybil, Mist' Bakrow's coming 'round fine. He's jes' like one o' dem prize fighters, been knocked a bit groggy, but he's feelin' fine," Slickum assured her. In a way it made it easier that Slickum stood between them and watched their farewell like a disinterested but reliable guard. One moment she was still there, so close Bob Marsh could have touched her if he had dared, and the next moment she was gone. He gave a deep sigh as he wandered off towards his own dressing-room, wondering about the lipstick on his shirt.

After entering her room Sybil leaned for a moment against the door, trying to collect herself. She was through with her part for to-night and she tore off her costume and changed into the blue outfit with the silver fox. She looked at her wrist watch, it was very late. If the last act didn't start soon they would miss the boat. She hoped they wouldn't. She wanted to be through with it all, with this

evening, with the opera, the season, the farewell from the Metropolitan. Farewell to myself, she thought.

She packed the costume away and closed the trunk; then she put her night things into her little suitcase, very orderly and with an odd feeling of pity for them. They, too, would get married now, her blue dressing-jacket to Sasha's camel-hair robe, her jar of cream to his bottle of shaving lotion, her tooth brush to his. Once more she looked at her wrist watch. "Why don't they start the act, for heaven's sake?" she thought, and all at once she felt an overwhelming fear close in on her. She left the room and went back on the stage to be there for Sasha's cue.

The lights dimmed and the audience ceased to talk and sat up in readiness for the beginning of the last act. But instead of the curtain going up to reveal the plaza in front of the arena, it billowed slightly and admitted a pale man in an ill-fitting evening suit who crept out of its folds and took a stand behind the footlights.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Dr. Mayer said, trying to steady his rubber knees, to clear his throat and to keep his German accent under control. "Ladies and Gentlemen, I am very sorry to announce that Mr. Bhakaroff feels slightly indisposed. He apologizes for being unable to finish his part. Mr. Michael Stern will pitch in for him and sing Escamillo in the last act."

Dr. Mayer slunk off and left the audience undecided how to react. They were sorry for Bhakaroff and had no way of expressing it. The colloquial expression "to pitch in" had made slight of the accident, however, and Dr. Mayer was justly proud of it. His exit was followed by a silence, then by a murmur of regret. At this moment there came a lonely and frantic hand-clapping from the second balcony. Heads turned towards it, some people hissed, some giggled.

"Didn't I tell you, Papa, didn't I know it right away?" Olga Kalish shouted. "Didn't I tell you it was Mike's voice? Didn't I know it when I heard the first note? Why, there is not a singer in the world with a voice like our Mike. Ain't you happy, Mamma, ain't you happy, Papa? It's like in the movies. Imagine, Mike singing for a famous star like Bhakaroff. Wasn't it cute what he said about him pitching in? And what a pitcher my Mike is, just wait and see."

Papa Kalish damped Olga's frenzy by asking prosaically: "Will he get paid for doing another man's work?"

"Paid?" Olga whispered loudly. "Why, he'll make millions, Papa. He'll be the greatest, highest paid——"

Suddenly her face fell with disappointment as she remembered the two empty seats next to her. "Naturally, Cora would have to leave just when such a thing happens," she said. "I bet you the baby won't come for another week. But she has to go home, she has to run away, just when Mike sings a big part. There, they are going to start. Keep your fingers crossed, Papa, and you too, Mamma. Gosh, I think I'm getting a stroke——"

"Quiet! Silence! Shut up!" was hissed at them and Olga crossed her fingers, shut her mouth and even her eyes as if a gun had gone off nearby. Family Kalish fell into silence; only Mamma said dreamily: "And none of your modern wishy-washy weddings. I want the rabbi and a long veil and orange blossoms for you——"

Old Mrs. Johnson had slept a bit towards the end of the smuggler act, but she opened her eyes when Dr. Mayer came out to make his announcement. She felt chilly and uncomfortable and to make up for the indignity of dozing off during one of her favourite operas, she sat very straight and stiff now, looking more regal than ever. She took the opera glass to glance at Pierre Colin who usually remained

in the pit during the brief intermission between the third and fourth acts of "Carmen." But he was not there and Mrs. Johnson, disappointed, dropped the glass again and wrapped herself tighter into her shawl. She felt chilly. The intermission went on interminably. The rows of boxes began to blur once more in front of her eyes, and before she knew it she had fallen asleep again.

Peter Johnson had left his box immediately after the announcement to go back-stage. He was on the board of directors and he was slightly worried about Bhakaroff's accident. After he had left, Henry Carter sat on for a few minutes, impatient and rather uneasy. Then he too got up abruptly, murmured an excuse to his daughter and rushed after Johnson. He had good reasons. The scene Marina had made during the first intermission had left him greatly ruffled. On the stage Marina would leap and whirl into the air, a lovely creature made of stardust and moonlight, not heavier than a soap bubble. But when it came down to money matters, she had as much weight and no more sense than a steam-roller. Handsome Henry was afraid of Marina, afraid she might run into Johnson back-stage, make a scandal and shatter all his castles in the air. "Johnson, wait for me," he called, rushing out to follow his puritan friend back-stage. Mabel was hurt. Men had no manners, especially American men. She had gone out of her way to send the bunch of violets and her lipstick message to Robert Marsh. He might at least have given her a sign of recognition, a smile, a bow in her direction. Now success seemed to have gone to his head and made him vain and conceited like all the other opera singers she knew. I hope he'll get fat, she thought spitefully; she had a lovely conception of herself, all in white and so terribly, terribly lonely, misunderstood by everybody and with a broken heart beneath her pearls and platinum foxes——

Peter, on his part, was not too cheerful either. The opera

went on and on, sticky and old-fashioned, and the longer it lasted the less he seemed to care for Kati. She had been wonderful in Luxor, with the moonlight on her face and the band playing in the distance. He tried hard to recapture that mad intensity, the enchantment of that first infatuation. He looked at Mabel's petulant face. If she were the pal she claimed to be she would be nice to him just now, not just sit there and sulk. "Darned long intermission," he said.

"Your company doesn't make it any shorter," she answered.

It was not easy for Henry Carter to get back-stage. The usher who had willingly opened the door for Peter Johnson, rudely closed the same door in Henry Carter's face. For the Johnsons had belonged to the Met. and its board of directors for three generations, whereas the Carters had only just arrived in the Social Register and were not yet recognized by the conservative ushers of the theatre. The small fact that grandfather Carter had peddled a bundle of cotton goods in the Middle West kept Handsome Henry outside that door and brought home to him once more the truth that, push as he might, he would never catch up with the Johnsons. But, then, his own grandchildren would be able to boast a grandfather with a box in the Metropolitan and they would *belong*. This idea gave him new vigour and with a renewed firmness he forced his way into the back-stage citadel of the Metropolitan.

The first thing that caught his eye was Johnson standing in a corner, with Marina coyly balancing on tip-toes and stroking his lapels. Henry braced himself and walked up to them. "Here you are, Johnson," he said, as nonchalantly as he could manage with no breath left and perspiration streaming down his forehead. "Hello, Duckywucky," Marina said mercilessly. He gave her a cramped smile. "Duckywucky yourself," he retorted, and, linking his arm in Johnson's, he tried to drag him away.

"This little lady tells me that Bhakaroff is quite well," Johnson said.

"He was just showing off," Marina remarked. "It's all a pose with him. He would have loved to faint in front of the audience, but Madame didn't let him. She knows his tricks."

This brought Johnson's mind back to his own courtship. "I'll go over and see how she feels about it," he announced, but Marina clung to him. "She is rehearsing in room four, I'll take you there," she said, sticking her chin out towards Carter who made helpless signs behind Johnson's back. "Keep your pants on, Duckywucky, I'm not going to bite a piece off either of you," she added.

"You and Henry are friends, I take it," Johnson said uncomfortably.

"I hope so," Marina answered with a velvety threat.

"I have known her since she was a baby," Henry muttered, trying to save the situation, as he ambled behind them through the stage door. In the first wing they were stopped by a pale, dishevelled and insane looking man in a white coat.

"Get out of here," this man yelled at them. "No one is permitted on the stage; get out! Do you want to be killed too? It's dangerous, this is no playground, this is not a zoo where you can come to look at the monkeys. *Mein Gott*, can't you understand? Get out—or I'll have you thrown out by the police!"

Marina flitted off with a giggle and a fine *tour-de-chat*. Henry and Johnson were holding on to each other's hand like babes in the wood as they retreated. Dr. Mayer wiped his face with his sleeve, getting both still dirtier than before, and tried once more to organize the chaos within and without. He had gone to pieces, and his nerves had snapped after Dr. Benz had announced Bhakaroff's inability to go on with the performance. The spicy music of the last interlude covered the trampling noise of six impatient horses waiting in the wings—and the last act was on.

THE LAST ACT

"THERE was a 'phone call for you, Madam," Semper reported when Kati entered her dressing-room after the third act. "They want you to call back, so I've written the number for you. They've called three times while you were on the stage; it's very important, they said."

Madame extended a tired and trembling hand to take the slip of paper and examine the number. Circle 3-5892. She felt quite exhausted after the fiasco of the last scene. There was an evil spell over some performances and this seemed to be one of them. For her, Don José had spoiled the first act by his clumsiness and the second by his unbridled roaring. And now, when he seemed to have found his feet and there was at last some hope that their duet in the last act would come off well, an unpleasant tickling made itself felt in her strained throat. Once more she opened her mouth as wide as a hungry rhinoceros and, with the assistance of a mirror and a strong light bulb, she did what she called "looking into her stomach." Disdainfully she nodded her head and proceeded to give the interior of her throat an ample spray. Then she let herself slump into the wicker chair, stretching out her legs for Semper to pull off her boots.

"What was the matter with Mr. Bhakaroff?" Semper asked her. "I see they've called the doctor into his dressing-room?"

"It's nothing, I imagine," Madame answered absently, scrutinizing the telephone number which Semper had scribbled down for her. "Sprained his ankle or something and made a big fuss about it. They are getting him into shape for the last act now. As a matter of fact, such things can be very painful; I sprained my ankle once, in 'Tosca,'

in Budapest, my dear; I can tell you the pain was something terrible."

"Will he be able to go on? They say he's fainted," Semper said as she began to rearrange Madame from the feet up. She kneeled down to slip on the white satin slippers with the daring red heels, but Madame kicked them off at once.

"Shoes come last," she said. "We have enough time. They'll have to lengthen the intermission because of Bhakaroff. Anyway, all he has still to sing is that short, little duet with me."

Madame sighed, because a second duet, long and difficult and very strenuous, lay ahead of her and her throat felt very dry. Semper, too, sighed, as she clattered around in the background. By now they were more than ten minutes late anyway, and how long it would take Mr. Bhakaroff to get in shape for the last act no one could tell. Semper lived in New Jersey and she had a little dog at home, such a darling and quite housebroken, but when he was left alone too long he would forget his education, chew up pillows and rugs and make an awful mess. . . .

Circle 3-5892, Madame mused. "Never heard of the number. Didn't they leave a name?"

"No," Semper answered, producing an evil-smelling steaming cup. It was Madame's special 'infusion,' a mixture of camomile, Irish moss and some third and horrid ingredient. It was a deep descent from the champagne of the first intermission to this unpleasant brew of the third, but it corresponded with Madame's gloomy mood. She closed her nose with her fingers, not to taste the hateful thing, and gulped it down as hot as she could stand it. Then she slumped back into her chair. Semper, meanwhile, peeled off her grey costume and rustled invitingly with the white and golden one for the last act. The black wig stuck with an air of festive expectancy on its wooden stand, complete

with lace mantilla and high comb. Madame closed her eyes, waiting for the blissful effect of the infusion, her entire life and being concentrated in the tiny, tickling area in her throat. Suddenly a ray of light penetrated her gloom. Antony! she thought. Antony has 'phoned. She jumped up and a moment later she rushed bare-footed down the corridor to grab the telephone. Dancing on her toes and drumming some melody, she waited for the connection. At last her call was put through and the impersonal voice of some operator announced the name of some hotel which Madame couldn't understand.

"This is Kati Lanik speaking, at the Metropolitan," she called into the tube. "You have a message for me?"

"Just one moment, Madame," the impersonal voice announced; there was some clicking and buzzing and then another woman's voice said: "Yes?"

"This is Madame Lanik speaking. Who's there?"

"It's I," the telephone said.

"I—who?"

"Don't you know my voice? I would recognize yours among millions," the telephone remarked, very hurt. Now Madame knew the tone if not the voice. "Katzler!—" she said, flabbergasted. "Where are you? From where are you talking?"

"I went to your hotel. They would not let me into your room, so I had to take the one next door. Unfortunately I haven't enough money with me to pay for it. I'm sorry to be such a nuisance."

What a mess, what a mess, Madame thought, in all languages she knew. "Why didn't you go back to Boston as you were told," she asked sharply.

"I missed the train."

"Don't lie to me," Madame shouted in exasperation. "You didn't *want* to go back, that's why you missed it, *Du tepperter Dickschädel!*"

The telephone seemed to contemplate the right answer. "I'm sorry," it said at last. "I thought as long as I had come to New York I might at least try to see Cyril. I went to his club but he wasn't there. And after that, of course, my train was gone——"

Madame made a tremendous effort to be patient. "Thank heavens he wasn't there," she said. "Husbands don't like to be trailed by their wives to their clubs. And how could he have been at his club when I told you that I would talk to him face to face."

"Mother—you *did* talk to him?" the telephone cried impulsively. It was a long time since Katzerl had called her mother Mother. "What did he say? How did he look? And tell me, did you like him?"

"I think he is a pleasant boy. We get along quite nicely," Madame replied reservedly.

"You would," the telephone said.

"How's that?" Madame asked.

"You and he, you are birds of a feather," Katzerl said bitterly. She had a way of making the simplest statement sound like an insult.

Madame took stock of the entire situation. "What am I going to do with you now?" she then said. "You cannot stay at my hotel; it might spoil everything." There was still Antony; he might want to come and visit her after the opera——

"Spoil what?" Katzerl demanded sharply.

"Everything, can't you see? I had not much time to talk things over with your husband, naturally, during the performance. But I feel that I have a good influence and that Cyril will listen to me once we get better acquainted and that he'll take my advice after I'll have told him more about you. I expect to have a real good long talk with him after the performance. But I can't have you eaves-dropping in the next room."

"Well, what do you want to do with me? Throw me into the river so you can talk all night long with my husband?" Katzerl said, and Madame saw her raising all her bristles.

"Be reasonable, Katzerl," she said pleadingly. "Can't you see you are in my way?"

"Yes, oh yes, I can see it. I am in your way; I have been in your way ever since I was born; I am especially in your way when you set out to make a new conquest. But Cyril belongs to me and not to you, do you understand, and I won't go out of your way to make things simpler for you. You won't take Cyril away from me, not my own husband."

Madame conceived with horror that her senseless child was jealous of her. "I could slap her face," she thought. "I could slap your face," she said into the telephone, but this was only small relief. "Just when I have Cyril almost ready to come back to you, you'd talk like a fool, and act like a fool. Go to hell for all I care and take your husband with you. I won't have anything to do with your blasted marriage; I have to sing; I am getting hoarse; I don't want to talk another word. I'll send him a message that I don't want to see him after the performance and then you may try and get him back yourself."

This seemed to impress Katzerl. Madame heard some trumpeting sounds in the telephone as Katzerl blew her nose. A moment later she said quite sensibly: "I'm sorry. I am so unbalanced lately. Maybe it's the baby. If you don't want me in your hotel, of course, I will move out. You see, I have not enough money for another hotel but I could stay in the waiting room of Grand Central Station until to-morrow morning——"

Madame felt a major explosion coming on, but she managed once more to hold on to herself as she said cheerfully: "Look here, Katzerl, don't be so absurd. Everything will be all right. I can promise you that Cyril will be back with you the end of this week. I have persuaded him to fly

to San Francisco to-morrow morning in order to have more time to talk things over with him and he promised to come along. Now, would he fly with me if he were not in love with you?"

It took the telephone a few seconds to digest this. It cleared its throat, it coughed—or sobbed—a few times before it answered. "You persuaded him? *You* persuaded him? And he's going with you to San Francisco?"

"Yes—isn't it perfect?" Madame said, loading her voice with sugar and spice and as much glee as she could produce in view of the messed-up evening and the tickle in her throat which had returned with a vengeance. There was no answer, not a sound. As if the line had gone dead. "Are you there, Katzerl? Why don't you answer? Senta? Katzerl? Goopy? Say something," she urged.

"Listen to me, mother," Katzerl said now and there was not a trace of her usual petulance in it. "If you take Cyril to San Francisco with you I'll make an end to it all. I have all the veronal I need right here at my night table. I've stood all I can stand—from you—and from him. And this is final, mother. Good-bye."

Madame slammed the receiver down furiously. "*Hovne*" she cursed, "*verdammte Kuh*, damned little idiot." Not for a second did she believe in Katzerl's childish threat. Only now did she realize how much time she had wasted on this fruitless conversation. She rushed back to her room, threw the door open and shouted at Semper: "Hurry up, get me dressed, you drive me crazy, all of you."

Semper pressed her lips into her wrinkled smile, pushing Madame into her dress and bolero, slapping the wig on to her head, draping the mantilla around her shoulders and kneeling down once more to put the slippers on her feet. The gypsy-necklace Madame had given her trembled on her virtuous chest. Madame bent down to her with a sad and pleading smile.

"I'm having lots of trouble, Semper," she said softly.

"Who hasn't?" Semper replied grudgingly.

For a second Madame was worried, harassed by the thought of Katzerl with a tube of veronal on her night table. "Ah, bah," she thought, "people never do it. People don't simply go and die. If I had only time, one day, two days, to stay on and fix things up between them. They need a good spanking, both of them. If I had only time." She saw herself in their little home in Boston. She wore a cotton frock and a handkerchief tied around her head, with a big bow over her forehead like the peasant girls in her home country. She gave Cyril his breakfast and made him laugh, and after their morning fun he took the tray and brought it into the bedroom for Katzerl. And Katzerl was made-up to perfection; she smiled and wore a little lacy bed-jacket and a blue ribbon around her hair, the colour of her eyes, and you could see the sweet, young lines of her little breasts and her finely chiselled shoulders. For by now Madame had taught her how to attract and hold her man. And everything would be splendid—if only she had time. But she had no time and her thoughts leapt from the marital bliss of the Durham family to Antony who had not called up so far, to all the contretemps that had developed during the first evening of her arrival in the States, to Bhakaroff's little accident, and then back again to the tickle in her throat which by now had become really serious.

She sprayed once more, sang a few solfeggios, gave it up again and then she sat down on the creaky wicker chair, her hands folded in her lap, and said sadly: "Semper, I think now I am really hoarse."

"Serves you right, why do you talk so much," Semper thought unkindly but did not say it. She went on making clattering and reproachful noises in the background. There was a knock at the door.

"Who's that?" croaked Madame.

It was Pierre Colin, and as he stopped on the threshold Madame thought: "You don't look too well either, my friend." Having been married to him, she knew all the little signs which showed that he was tired and nervous. He carried himself straighter than usual, his voice had more of an edge and his words became as precise as if he had learnt them by heart.

"Sorry to incommode you, my dear," he said. "We'll have to go through your little duet with Escamillo. Bhakaroff won't sing the last act. Mike Stern has understudied the part, the boy who sang Zuniga, you know?"

"Another beginner," Madame said in disgust. Colin shrugged his shoulders. "Haven't we all been beginners at one time or another?" he said. "In my opinion Stern will become one of the greatest singers the stage has ever had."

But now Madame began to worry about Bhakaroff. "And Sasha?" she said. "What's the matter with him? Can't he pull himself together and go through with it? Remember when I sprained my ankle, during Tosca, in Budapest——"

"He's dizzy. The doctor wants him to rest," Pierre said. "Everything has gone wrong to-night. Come, let's go."

Madame followed him in her proud regalia to the room where the little pimply-faced assistant sat at the piano, ready for the brief, improvised rehearsal. Mike Stern was not there yet.

"We'll have to teach the future star some manners," Madame said angrily. The assistant rushed out to call for Stern, his voice trailing off down the corridor. Colin sat down at the piano and began to play a Prelude to Bach. "He has to get dressed, we must be patient," he said in French. There was an odd contrast between the crystal-like clearness of that Prelude and the musty smell of the room, of Carmen's theatrical face and make-up, of the old photos along the wall, of the whole atmosphere of Grand Opera.

Madame listened for a moment, then, going over to the table, she poured herself a glass of water; her throat was dry and sandy. While she drank she picked up a paper someone had left on the table and mechanically scanned through it.

It was at this moment that something irrevocable happened to Madame. The last little rainbow faded out of her life, love took a bow and made a quiet exit, never to return. But this Madame didn't know yet.

In that crumpled paper there was a photo of Antony. Her heart beat a bit faster when she came across it, it beat exactly as it had done when she had been fourteen and really in love for the first time. For in every middle-aged woman there lives, hidden but unchanged and immortal, the wide-eyed, eager, emotional girl she has once been. . . .

The photo showed Antony exactly as he had looked that morning when she had said good-bye to him: a tweedy sort of man with a pipe into his mouth. Madame smiled down at the photo, forgetting for a moment the confusion in the Durham *ménage*, the spoilt performance, forgetting even her refractory throat. Then she proceeded to read the caption under the photo.

- "After a long chase police succeeded to-day in arresting Philip Hassel, the jewel thief, whose spectacular robberies of three Fifth Avenue shops are still remembered. Hassel had recently transferred his hunting grounds to the big luxury liners where he travelled under the name of Antony Inglewood and specialized in courting middle-aged ladies who usually lost some of their jewels during the brief sea voyage. Hassel, who had grown a moustache and was dressed very smartly, was arrested on his arrival in the *Queen Mary* and confessed with good humour and some bravado that the jewels found in the soles of his shoes were the spoils of his latest trip."

Madame read this three times, then she folded the paper

neatly and put it back on the table. The door opened and, followed by the little assistant, Mike Stern made his entrance. He was tightly buttoned into his costume of a toreador, a short, round, pompous, common but good-natured little man, who some day would be one of the great opera singers.

"Here I am," he said proudly. "Don't you worry about me, I know the part. Come on, Madame, let's have it."

Madame got up with an effort. It was very late and she had still three scenes to sing. Three scenes with beginners, with young people who knew nothing but who did not get hoarse. She was very hoarse now. She was very tired. She felt like a puppet with the strings cut off.

Bhakaroff was lying on the couch in his dressing-room and taking a rest. He felt quite happy, only somewhat chilly. It was always chilly in the shade of the garden wall where the old pump stood. He left the shade and went over to the sunny side of the garden. The pear tree was full of pears, golden, heavy, juicy pears. "Don't eat them before they are ripe, Sasha."

"*Non, Maman, ne dérange-toi.* Give me some of the pears, Maman, I am very thirsty. Don't climb up the tree, you'll fall down, Bébé. It's getting late, I have to get up, I must dress, I must go to the boat. Only five minutes' rest. Get up, Sasha, get dressed." "How you feelin' now, Mist' Bakrow?" "Thanks, Slickum, perfect. I must get dressed. The boat."

At his master's mumbling Slickum came over to the couch, but he couldn't understand him. He had taken off some of the make-up, but in the midst of it Mist' Bakrow had seemed so tired that he gave it up. There was still some olive grease-paint under the eyes, around the ears and along the chin. Bhakaroff stirred and moved his lips. Slickum looked at the clock and again at his master. "Looks okay, though," he thought.

The room was very tidy by now. The big trunks had been sent ahead to the boat and only two neatly packed suitcases waited, gaping for the last pieces to be put in. Bhakaroff still wore the breeches and high boots of the third act. Something seemed to disturb him and he frowned in his sleep. The tap in the corner was dripping, plop, plop, plop. It had been dripping all the years Slickum had known this dressing-room. He went over and tried to screw it tight but it went on dripping. The door opened noiselessly and Sybil slipped in. She tiptoed over to the couch, scrutinized Bhakaroff's face and turned her questioning glance towards Slickum. He nodded consolingly. She tip-toed back to the door and beckoned him to come outside.

"Is he asleep, Slickum?"

"Yes, Mā'am, sound asleep."

"What did the doctor say?"

"Doctor say let him rest some more, do him good. Doctor say he got a bad bump, needs quiet. Maybe a little 'cussien, doctor say."

"Yes, I talked to him. Has Mr. Bhakaroff been ill again, Slickum?"

"No, Miss Sybil, not exactly, he's been fine. Now don't you worry 'bout him, Miss Sybil."

"It's getting too late for the boat, isn't it?"

"Yes, Mā'am, A s'pose it is."

Sybil went back into the room. Bhakaroff had turned his face towards the wall. He was covered with his soft travel-coat and over the coat Slickum had spread the long, black Spanish cape he had worn in the second act. I am cold, Sybil, come close, lie down by me and get me warm, he begged. Sybil bent over him to understand his mumbling, but it was in Russian. She put her hand on his forehead. "He feels cold," she whispered as a shiver passed through his body and made the cape ripple. A great fondness for

the sleeping man surged up inside her in big, rolling waves which left her helpless. She sat down at the edge of the couch, not knowing what to do now. Slickum had vanished from the room without a sound. The tap dripped, dripped, dripped.

"Hello, Joe," Slickum said, entering the prop. room. Joe was squatting on a box, his head buried in his hands.

"Hello," he said listlessly. There were shelves and shelves behind him, where endless rows of props., weapons and shields, garlands and cups, flags and draperies, were neatly lined up. But on the floor in front of Joe there was complete confusion, a medley of to-night's props. which he had not put back in their places yet.

"I needs a few blankets and rugs or what have you?" Slickum said. "Mist' Bakrow's feelin' cold."

"I didn't make any mistake, I didn't load anything wrong into that rifle," Joe said wildly and Slickum thought, "They've driven him crazy." "I might have been a bit confused, but Lord Almighty, there is not a bullet in this here whole theater," Joe went on like a man who has repeated the same thought a thousand times.

"Sure, Joe," Slickum said. "Now, give me them blankets and forget it. How's the kiddy?"

"I don't know," Joe said. "I don't know, I can't get a call through. I got as far as the night-nurse but she didn't know a thing about the baby. I asked her just to call my wife to the 'phone but nothing doing. It's against the rules, she said. Wonder if they would treat me like that if I could afford a spe-ci-alist and a first-class operation?"

He turned to the shelves, pulling some layers of velvet and brocade from them at random. A small, compact cloud of dust arose together with the all-pervading smell of moth-ball. "Bring them back before you leave the house," he said. "I'm really not allowed to give them to you and I've had all the trouble I can stand to-night."

He sat down on his box again, with his head in his hands, and went on brooding.

"Now, Joe," Slickum said, stopping at the door. "Squattin' like this won't do no man no good! You've gotta work. You've gotta move 'round an' do something. Makes you forget your troubles and when you turn 'round it's all over and the kiddy's well again."

"Have you ever had trouble like I have?" Joe asked. He lifted his head; but his hands still dangled down like lifeless things.

"Sure had, Joe. I haves not seen no man with no troubles in my whole life. I haves not seen no troubles would last for ever either. Troubles come an' go jess' like evert'ing else. Troubles are made to forget them."

"Are you a married man?" Joe asked. He could not believe that any man had ever lived through a night like this.

"Not now, thanks to the Lawd," Slickum said. "When I was in vaudeville I was a married man; then I breaks my leg, lose my job. Had three kiddies too. Them all dies in that epidemic. 'Good-bye kiddies, see you again in heaven.' The wife runs off with another man. 'Good-bye, wife, see you again in hell.' Now A is a happy man. No moh troubles for me."

He lifted his arm with the coverlets and left. As he turned his eyes back he had the satisfaction of seeing Joe stir and go to work with his props.

He found the dressing-room as he had left it. Bhakaroff was still resting and Sybil sat at the edge of the couch and watched his face. The tap dripped. The suitcases waited to be packed and closed. The time went by. From the stage came distant singing as the opera passed through its last scenes. The ballet was over and the new Escamillo's little duet with Carmen had begun. Mike Stern's superb voice could be heard clearly, even here in this room. Sybil

watched Sasha's face but he seemed far away in his restless dreams.

"Thank heaven you are back, Slickum," Sybil said. "I am worried, I want the doctor."

"Yes, Ma'am," Slickum said and left again after he had spread all the stuff from the prop. room over Bhakaroff. The light caught little sparks in the theatrical fabrics. They glistened, all these velvets and brocades and satins, cheap and utterly ineffective. "Like the opera. Like the stage. Like life itself," Sybil thought.

Bhakaroff had meanwhile travelled to the Crimea, had reached the southern shores in one quick dream-trip. He liked the Crimea. The grapes were big and thick in the vineyards. He did not want to go into another war. They had shot him to pieces once and that was enough. "I must get up, get dressed, go to the boat, Sybil," he said.

"Sybil," he said.

"Yes, dear," she answered eagerly. "I am here."

His eyes travelled along the ceiling, all over the room, until they finally arrived at her face which was so unexpectedly close to his.

"I must get dressed. I must get up. The boat."

"Wait till Slickum comes to help you with the dressing," she said. He wriggled a bit but quietened down when she put her hands on his chest.

"*Il fait bien froid ici, n'est-ce pas!*" he said and Sybil began breathing into his hands to get them warm.

"*On est très paresseux,*" he said. "I'm a lazy devil. I've got to get up, get dressed, go to the boat——"

He closed his eyes again and went back to his mumbling. Sybil went outside to the door, impatient for the doctor to come. Now the Escamillo duet was over and there seemed to be some applause for the beginner who had saved the last act.

"At last——" Sybil said as Dr. Benz came hurriedly

down the passage, followed by Slickum. At the sight of the fat and self-satisfied little man her nerves cracked.

"Why didn't you stay with him?" she said. "Why do you leave us alone? He can't lie in there for ever. Why don't you do something, say something? Help him to get out of this condition. I am worried. I am terribly worried, Doc," she added pleadingly. The doctor bustled into the room, all optimism and professional cheerfulness. He was used to this extraordinary tribe of opera singers. He was well acquainted with their exaggerations, their hysteria, their tendency to dramatize every trifling discomfort. He liked them and he believed he understood them. He was convinced that fifty per cent of all opera singers' ills were dictated by their nerves—and no wonder. They pounded on their nerves with sledge hammers, day in and day out. They needed an outlet and an escape once in a while, bless them! As for Bhakaroff's little accident, he attached no great importance to it. A bit bruised, a bit bumped, a bit shaken up, that was all—and making the most of it. Muttering a few soothing phrases he entered the room and bent over his patient. His expression grew serious. He saw the pallor on Bhakaroff's face and sized up all the symptoms; the flat, rattling breath, the thin, slow pulse, the unreflecting eyes. He rummaged in his bag, broke an ampulla, held his syringe against the light over the mirror and filled it. The prick of the injection made Bhakaroff wince. The doctor was glad of that. He waited for the effect of the caffeine, with his fingers on Bhakaroff's pulse. Then he tucked the limp hand back under the gleaming theatrical coverlet and went to the door. "I'm calling for an ambulance," he said, took his bag and left. Sybil ran after him, deeply perplexed. She didn't know what to say, what to think, what to fear. "What is it, Doc?" she called after him. "Is it—something dangerous?"

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled the way doctors

do when things are getting out of their control. "I don't know yet. I can't say. It is possible, however, that he burst a blood vessel in his brain, you know," he muttered and was gone.

Now there was the sound of trumpets, rather close by because they were placed backstage, there was the chorus heralding Escamillo's victory inside the arena while outside Carmen struggled with Don José. It seemed much too close and too loud all of a sudden, and Sybil closed the door very carefully before she returned to her post at the edge of the couch.

It was as if the call of the trumpets had reached Bhakaroff's wandering mind. He pushed through heavy layers of clouds, he rose to the surface of something that was deep and cold and dark like the bottom of a river and once more he came up to where there was light and air and Sybil.

Maybe the injection had done its work; or maybe it was the merciful minute of clarity that is given to us in our dying hour. Now he could see Sybil, very close and very clear. She seemed to him unearthly, beautiful and kind. No trouble with his eyes now, no more chills, no more fears. He sat up and took her face between his hands as he had done a hundred times in the past. She smiled at him. She kept the tears back with a supreme effort and smiled at him.

"Sybil, my darling," he said.

"Yes, dear," she answered. He scrutinized her face, he searched it, intense and urgent. Then, as if he had received an unspoken answer, he released it from his hands and stretched out again.

Bhakaroff had often died during his life. Not only during the war when that bullet had knocked him into unconsciousness. He had died also a hundred times the dramatic deaths of Grand Opera on the stage, on all the

opera stages of the world. He had been speared, stabbed, shot, poisoned and thrown from the cliffs of some fantastic castle. To die had been his speciality, and he had never died without the application of some excellent technique and with great effect. Feeling lighter and lighter, soaring from clarity to greater clarity, Bhakaroff smiled at all his stage deaths, now that it was time to die in earnest. It was so simple to die, and so easy. Now I won't be blind, ever, he thought calmly. He opened his eyes once more and squeezed the last drop of sweetness from life as he looked at Sybil and could see her better and clearer than ever before.

"No more operas?" he asked, as the clouds began to sink from the ceiling and all sounds were muffled and all colours dimmed. There was no reply and he smiled to himself, while rapidly it got darker.

"Too bad——" he said aloud. Now Sybil too had gone from him, everything had left him, save a contentment, so calm and serene that it did not seem to belong to this earth.

He made himself comfortable on his bed, for now he began to float into nothingness and there was the flutter of great wings around him and the tolling of deep, resounding bells.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "Nothing matters."

Sybil kept on smiling even after he had ceased speaking. The tap dripped and dripped. Soon the opera would be finished. Slickum stood quietly at the door, he seemed to laugh even now. "Don't you worry, honey, don't you worry, Miss Sybil," he said. His eyes were very white in his honest, dark, pock-marked face.

EPILOGUE

A BEATEN, unhappy, tired old woman, Madame crept from the stage towards her dressing-room. She had begun this evening with so much exuberance, so sure of herself, so gloriously triumphant. She ended it in retreat, with flags torn and all reserves exhausted. The two duets in the last act, with the two young, strong and victoriously brutal beginners, had finished her. She was hoarse, her voice was gone. To her, at that moment, it seemed gone for ever. During the last scene she had been unable to sing at all, she had spoken her lines, screamed them, hissed them, whispered them, all the time desperately trying to cover her defeat by a lot of acting. "They" didn't seem to have noticed much. They had applauded and cheered for her as usual. She wondered whether They were merely stupid or just kind. "These Americans," she thought, as she went on her way, they didn't sing *with* me, they sang against me. They think an opera is like a boxing match or a game of football." "Good-night and congratulations," she croaked to them and crept on the long fatiguing way through the wings, through the heavy steel door, up the steps, around the corner and to the end of the passage, where the haven of her dressing-room was waiting for her. All she wanted now was quiet; to sit down, not to say another word, kick off these horrible, high-heeled slippers, bury her head in Petrushka's consoling little doll's lap and wait for Semper to get a pot with steaming water and pine oil ready for inhaling. But life was not as easy as all that. Even before Madame reached her door she discovered two sentinel-like figures waiting in front of it.

They wore top hats and wide-sleeved opera coats; they were the sort of men who had waited all her life in front

of Madame's dressing-room. "*Yeshishmareea*," Madame thought gloomily, "that's the last straw!" All the same she put a smile over her face, because audiences were audiences and you were not supposed to destroy their illusions. "How nice of you to come," she said, and faced the exhaustion of making small talk and polite conversation.

"We came to tell you how wonderful you have been, simply wonderful, my dear," Mr. Johnson said, trying to kiss her palm, but Madame was careful to keep her moist hands to herself. "Such a grand performance altogether, wasn't it? Too bad about Bhakaroff, they say he sprained his ankle? But these two young singers were amazing too, weren't they. It must be a great inspiration for you to get a partner like this Robert Marsh. Wasn't he sensational? That's what we need, new faces, new voices, new blood."

"Excuse me, I'm a bit tired——" Madame whispered hoarsely, pointing to her throat and trying to slink off.

"Not too tired, I hope, to have supper with us? We want to go to the Waldorf or somewhere and celebrate, we want to take that young tenor along and maybe we can even persuade Colin, though you know that he is married to a watch-dog, and a very vicious one at that. Henry Carter and his daughter are coming too—and Junior, of course."

Junior, who had kept himself in the background so far, came forward to pump Madame's hand. "Well, well——" he said, for want of a more articulate expression of his blurred emotions. So close to her he couldn't but feel something of Madame's magnetism, even if she were tired and didn't look her best. The air around her was always in vibration and Junior hoped urgently that she would be able to do some simple piece of magic and bring him under her glorious spell again.

"Hello——" she whispered. "How are you? You look splendid. He looks like an Apollo, Peter."

Mr. Johnson winced a bit, because this was not in their

agreement; this was not the right method to cool off Junior's stubborn infatuation for her.

"You promised to see him during the big intermission, do you remember? But you seemed too occupied," he said, with discreet reproach.

Madame wondered what Johnson tried to signal to her behind Junior's back. She was not quite so tired any more as she had been a few minutes before. She looked at the boy appraisingly and with expert appreciation. She liked to look at young males with broad shoulders and narrow hips; it was pleasant, like looking at a thoroughbred or a dish of big, ripe cherries.

"Rameses! Rameses the Second!" she called out in sudden enlightenment. "Do you remember? Cairo—Mena House? Luxor? What fun we had together. Oh, it's lovely to see you again. I thought you were buried in some nasty university."

"Didn't you get my letter?" Peter asked, uncomfortable under his father's glare but stubborn enough to defy it. "You never answered, except for that one card from Paris."

"Yes, aren't I wicked?" she said, smiling at him through her eyelashes. "I owe letters to the whole world, it's a shame. But I'll tell you a secret, Rameses, darling: I don't know how to spell. I haven't learned to spell correctly in any language. I've saved it up for the time when I'll be an old lady and will have nothing better to do."

By now Mr. Johnson was almost sorry he had invited her for supper. She smiled at Junior and Junior smiled at her, an idiotic, silly, conspiratory sort of smile. He cleared his throat. "I've told you that Junior is going to be engaged to Mabel Carter, you remember?" he said.

Madame had completely forgotten her promise, but now she remembered it. It was as if years had passed since that conversation with Johnson before the beginning of the opera. The things that had happened during these few hours; with

Katzerl, with Cyril, with Don José, with Bhakaroff. With Antony. With her. She realised the completeness of her depression and misery. No more waiting for telephone calls, no more Antony. There was no reason in the world now why she shouldn't accept Johnson's tedious supper invitation. As matters stood, she might as well go, give herself up, get married to Johnson and be done with it. Why had God created such a faulty and unsatisfactory world, where good men were dull and bald-headed, and nice-looking, amusing ones turned out to be thieves? Altogether she was just in the right mood to bring Junior to his senses. "Come in," she said, not too friendly. "Not you——" she added, pushing his father back from the door. "I'll send him out soon."

Mr. Johnson stood irresolutely in front of that closed door and then, feeling like an eavesdropper, he marched resolutely off to search for Mr. Henry Carter. During the last act he had decided to have an open man-to-man talk with Handsome Henry, make a clean breast of his own financial situation and in exchange show tolerance for Carter's constant and undignified escapades.

"Sit down," Madame said to Junior, collapsing in her own chair in front of the mirror. Off came the slippers with one kick and wig and mantilla with one pull. "*Schmalz*——" Madame croaked to Semper who at once produced a big jar of cold cream and put a few pounds of the mess on Madame's face. Peter saw it with horror and quickly averted his eyes from the sore spectacle. Madame tackled the problem in question without much ceremony. "Your father told me you don't want to marry the girl he has picked for you," she said from under Semper's massaging hands. "Why not? *Pourquoi pas?*" she ended, switching to French in order to keep the conversation out of Semper's grasp.

"You know why." Peter said thickly. "*Parce que je vous aime.*" He didn't know much French. Semper did.

"Couldn't you make yourself love the girl? She is pretty, I remember."

"She is a worthless little doll, a typical *débutante* an addle-brained socialite. Besides, I've known her too long to fall for her. She's like a stupid little sister to me."

"Take it off, *Semper*——" Madame said; Peter didn't dare look what it was that was taken off with a rustling of silk and a scraping noise on the floor.

"Ah, that's better," Madame sighed. "Now, listen, my boy," she returned to their conversation. "You know why your father wants you to marry her. We can't always do as we please, we have obligations, every one of us. Love is not the most important thing in life—('But: Oh, yes, it is,' cried her unreasonable heart): to save the old firm is much more important."

"Stop it, you don't believe yourself what you are saying," Peter called out. "You were prompted by my father, but it sounds only funny when you are trying to preach platitudes." ("Clever boy," Madame thought.) "You can't have forgotten that night when we sailed through the Suez Canal, when we talked about all my ideas and what I wanted to do later. You were so understanding; I've never met anyone as understanding as you. You are so human, you know life so well, I feel you would make a man of me if you—if we—if only——"

"Look at me," Madame said. "Don't flinch. Look at me."

Peter turned his head and looked at her. She had taken off her costume and was wrapped in a garment of unspeakable ugliness. Its greasy folds were sticky with layers of old powder and make-up, and it smelt of rancid oils and creams like everything in this repulsive room. Her hair, the silky blonde curls he had loved so much, was flattened out, wet and dark with sweat. She had no eyebrows, no eyelashes, and her neck was like a turtle's. Her face shone with cold cream and more cream filled every wrinkle, so that it looked like a map with a thousand white lines drawn on it,

"You see," Madame said quietly, "I'm old."

"You are not old," Peter shouted at her. He hated her for hurting him so, for destroying his lovely, lovely illusion; he could have hit that disgusting, horrible, tired, wise old face.

"Not very old for a cathedral, perhaps, but pretty old for a woman." Madame said, trying a little joke. "You think you love me? My dear boy! Now go and do the right thing. I have no more time for you."

"But in Luxor——" Peter said desperately.

"Yes, but that was in Luxor; there was moonlight, and silver on black palm trees, and a hot night and somewhere somebody played an Arabic flute. Props., Rameses, just props. You fell in love with a bunch of props. and make-belief. Now go, leave me alone, I am very tired. For God's sake, go!" she shouted as he still hesitated. She had the cream jar in her hands and she looked capable of throwing it at him. Hastily Peter retreated. As soon as the door had closed, Madame smiled faintly. I still can make men do what I want, she thought, but she knew it was a sad victory. She pulled Petrushka closer, clasping her stiff, wooden little arms around her neck and in this embrace she remained silently, while the water began to simmer on the small flame in the corner and the scent of pine oil filled the room. Semper was quietly sulking in the corner. Other stars brought their own personal maids along, but not Madame. She would keep on needing service and inhalations and treatments until the small hours of the morning. She took the steaming pot with the pine emulsion and slammed it down in front of Madame. "What you need is a good long vacation," she said; it was the nastiest thing that came to her mind.

Only when Madame didn't seem to get angry, Semper began seriously to worry about her. "Anything I can do for you?" she asked, but Madame had disappeared under the towel which bulged like a miniature tent around her head and there was silence again. Semper went back into

her corner to fidget with the trunks and do one or two other things which got terribly on Madame's nerves. But she didn't say anything. She finished her inhaling, blew her nose, and began to make up her face again. She brushed her hair while Semper plugged in the electric curling-iron and then proceeded to curl it again into a hundred pinkish-blond ringlets. Madame put perfume behind her ears and a dab of gold upon her eyelids. In the middle of this cosmetic resurrection she stopped. There was a panicky minute as she remembered what she had pushed out of her memory during the whole of the last act: Katzerl with an overdose of Veronal on her night table.

"Look, Semper," she said, "call up my hotel and ask for Mrs. Durham. Tell her I'll be there soon and that I am going to bring Mr. Durham along, do you get that? I'll bring Mr. Durham along. And, wait—ask her whether she wants to talk to me?"

Semper trotted off, moodily. Waiting for her return, Madame swore softly at her own image in the little mirror.

Everything would be much simpler if I could tell him that I am her mother, she thought. "Well, Katitshka, why can't you? I don't know," she pleaded with herself, "it's too late now, I can't." She did not remember how it had started, this complicated business of not having a daughter. She only remembered that at some point in the past Katzerl, returning from school, had been changed from a nice little baby into a long-legged, sulky, old-looking young lady, a creature most unbecoming to any mother, let alone a young star who was just then the rage of Vienna. A man had also been involved, a few years younger than Madame, a man who at that time had been of such deadly and all devouring importance to her that she would gladly have given her right hand, her voice, her life, to please him. Tucking Katzerl away for a brief interval had seemed a very small matter, but bringing her back afterwards had proved almost impossible.

"I never actually lied about you," Madame quarrelled against a small, terribly persistent voice; "I simply did not placard it all over the world that I had a grown-up daughter. I had to support you, hadn't I, I had to educate you, I've brought you up like a princess, I had to get contracts and make money and hold on to my career; can't you understand that I did it all for your sake? And do you think it was easy for me to be separated from you most of the time? Do you think I enjoy waiting for your answer over the telephone like this? I am tired, I am indisposed, I've worked and worked and worked. You take it easy, you go to bed with veronal on your night table and let me worry about you——"

"Mrs. Durham said it's all right," Semper announced, trotting back into the room. "She said, please to come home with her husband directly."

"Didn't she want to talk to me?"

"No. She said she didn't."

"Well, that's that," Madame thought. "That's Katzerl all over. *Verfluchter Dickschädel*. At least she is all right so far." Madame gave a sigh of relief and proceeded with her dressing. A wave of nostalgia surged up in her for Antony's hands, nice, sun-tanned, sensitive hands. "Naturally they are sensitive," Madame thought with brave irony. Thieves' hands always are.

She encountered Semper's inquisitive and reproachful glance. "Why are you still hanging around?" she said impatiently. "Go home, hurry, I don't need you, I can take care of myself. And don't forget to rub yourself with my medicine before you go to bed——"

Semper made a few feeble protests and fiddled around for another minute. But finally she had slipped on her coat—one of Madame's discarded coats—put on her flat hat, thanked Madame for the medicine and the Gypsy necklace, wished her a happy journey and lots of success in San Francisco, asked whether there was really nothing she could do for Madame and trotted off to her little dog in New

Jersey. Madame was left alone, waiting for Cyril who had promised to be back by then. Madame shot a glance at her wristwatch. It had stopped. In a fit of angry impatience she pushed it into her handbag. "Where is that rascal?" she thought. "Why can't he be here on time? How can he let me wait like this?"

It was one of Madame's unaccountable impulses that made her suddenly rush over to her trunk and wildly begin to dig into it. "Bhakaroff," she thought, "I almost forgot him in all my own trouble. Poor fellow, to give up before the last scene is no joke. A sprained ankle can be agony, I know it. And Sasha, such a good sort, such a pal, such a perfect colleague and I haven't even said good-bye to him. I haven't congratulated him on his wedding. I haven't even asked how he feels now. A wedding gift, she thought frantically, something unique, something worthy of Sasha. Where are my things, what shall I give him? Why did I let Semper go home, but that's just like me, I am always letting myself be victimized——"

Once more she plunged into the depths of the trunk. Like a pearl-diver she came up with three treasures which always travelled with her. A ring Chaliapin had given her after a performance of 'Marguerite.' A score of 'Electra,' the margins filled with remarks in Richard Straus's own handwriting. A beautiful black shawl given to her by Puccini after he had seen her in 'Tosca.' She looked from one to the other, unable to decide which one would make the nicest wedding gift for Sasha. Finally and most generously she took them all three with her to let him choose whichever he liked best. The idea of giving away something that was very dear and precious to her made her extremely happy. She hung the shawl over her shoulder, slipped on the ring, clasped the 'Electra' score under her arm and went on her way to the men's side.

The stage was dark and almost empty by now, with only a few emergency lights here and there. The backdrop with all

its glamour of the arena had been removed; it slept right up in the catwalk, an unsightly roll of painted canvas. The stage, open all the way to the backwall where pipes crawled along the bricks, looked very big, very sober and yet fantastic. As Madame sized up the vastness of the stage, she wondered, as so often before, how any human voice could ever fill it and bring it to life. Her steps sounded loud and hollow because there were endless caves down below; a strange, weird underworld of machinery where little electricians and machinists concocted the great magic of Grand Opera. To Madame, all this was home, this and nothing else on earth.

The corridors on the men's side were still full of life and noise. The elevator rumbled by with chorus singers, stage hands, stragglers of all sorts. Mike Stern's victorious voice could be heard all over the place as he sang in his dressing-room on the upper floor. Dressers went to and fro, tidying up for the night, carrying costumes, uniforms, Spanish hats, all the colourful paraphernalia of 'Carmen.' The stairwell, the passages, every nook and corner, were cluttered up with props and things like a back street in Naples. The walls were painted in a shining, butcher-red colour which somehow reminded Madame of the French Revolution and the guillotine. Max, the little pimply-faced assistant, scurried by and Madame stopped him to inquire if Bhakaroff was still in his dressing-room. "He hasn't left so far," a stagehand said, pushing by with a load of pennants. Bhakaroff's dressing-room was the last one on the left, as far removed from the unavoidable noise of the theatre as possible. Madame arrived in front of the door, happy as a child about her surprise. She didn't knock because this would have spoilt her big entrance and her theatrical instincts were stronger than her good manners. Neither did she open the door in a normal way; it flew open before her as all doors did and she stopped on the threshold, all smiles and regrets and blessings and good companionship.

"Is he gone?" Madame asked; there was no answer. "Is he gone to the boat?" she had meant to ask. It was at this moment that Madame received a hard and horrid shock. There were mirrors around the walls, here as in all other dressing-rooms, yet all these mirrors gave no reflection. She stood in front of them but could not find her own image in their glass, just a black nothingness. Only when Madame discovered that each mirror was covered with a piece of black silk, she began to understand what had happened. Her eyes wandered from the covered mirrors to the open window, searched in Slickum's closed, blunt face and finally found the still figure lying on the couch in the corner.

Madame gave one muffled little cry but caught herself at once. "Is he——?" she whispered. "Yes'm," Slickum answered. She went back to the door and closed it, put her score down on the dressing-table and took off the black shawl. Then she tip-toed to the couch and looked down on Bhakaroff's strong, handsome, familiar and yet strangely transformed face. He was covered to the chin with his own black Spanish cape, because Slickum had duly returned the velvets and brocades to the prop. room. Bhakaroff did not look like anyone who would die normally in his bed and be buried in a respectable black suit. There was drama in his lying there like this, covered with his last costume; and Madame savoured and appreciated this drama. She would have liked to add something appropriate to the scene. Light candles, place them at his head and feet, make a cross over him, kneel down and pray. She did not realize that all this was a reminiscence of 'Tosca,' second act. Countless times she had sung Tosca with Bhakaroff, thirty-six times, to be exact; she had killed him, stabbed him with a knife, placed candles at his head and feet, prayed over him, had seen him dead as he was now. Perhaps it was this familiarity which somehow blunted the shock for her. As there were no candles near, she took the black Venetian shawl, Puccini's gift, and

spread it over his feet. Slickum stood beside her, looking down at his master's calm, beautiful and haughty face.

"He seems to like it there—wherever he is now," Madame said. "Yes'm," Slickum said. She bent closer over that still face and now she detected the traces of grease-paint which were left around his ears and under his eyes. "Look——" she whispered. "Yes," Slickum said, shaking his head, as if a child in his charge had run off to play before it was completely dressed. "Give me some cream," Madame said, rolling up her sleeves. It was the only thing she could do for Sasha and it was not much. But she felt she would not have liked to be left like this; it was not dignified for a dead man to have spots of grease-paint on his face. Slickum understood and seemed pleased. He even showed a good deal of his white teeth with the beautiful gold fillings as he unpacked the cream jar once more and held it out for Madame. She dipped her fingers into the cool smoothness of the cream and, kneeling down beside the couch, she began very gently but with a sure and firm pressure to take off the last bit of make-up from the face of her dead partner in many duets. Then she looked once more at Sasha, pleased, satisfied and only a little sad. She touched his sleek, dark toreador hair very slightly, then she picked up her Electra score and turned to go. Slickum followed her to the door. "Where's Miss Olivier?" she asked under her breath. "How did she take it?"

"Miss Sybil? She took it like a good li'lle soldier, yes'm, she's a real trooper, not a word out of her. She's at the office, Mist' Certosa taken her upstairs hisself, he's terribly upset, he's been keepin' Miss Sybil in the office all the time. Nat'chally, Mist' Certosa don't want nobody to know what's happened, but Miss Sybil don't need his preachin', she knows moh' about 'dis here opera than the whole Boh'd of Derectors, she won't make no noise as long as anybody is in the house. Now don't you give me away, Ma'am, that I lets

you see him, 'cause nobody's s'posed to know nothing 'bout pooh Mist' Bakrew gone."

Madame's comprehension of Slickum's dialect was incomplete, but she deduced that Sybil Olivier was in the manager's office. "I'll wait for her," she said impulsively. "The poor little thing, I'll take care of her——"

"No, Ma'm, thanks, Ma'm, I takes care 'of Miss Sybil all right," Slickum whispered with great determination. Noiselessly he opened the door for her, peered down the corridor and, as he found it empty, he once more put his finger to his lips, melted into the wall and was gone without a sound.

The musicians filed out, one by one, carrying their instruments, which slept in their cases like pampered babies in royal cradles, wrapped in silk and bedded on velvet. Miss Tyne was still in the pit, putting her harp into its warm, comfortable, padded nightshirt. Everything was over. Now she could go home to her mother and count twenty drops of medicine on a lump of sugar as she did every night. Her eyes and the tip of her nose were a little red, for Miss Tyne had cried during the last act. She had, in fact, cried ever since she had bungled her part in the third interlude, that beautiful, important part that was almost a harp solo. She had bungled it horribly and Pierre had shot one of his terrible glances at her. To bungle was always a catastrophe, but to bungle the only time in her life when she had played under his *bâton* was enough to make you commit suicide. But then, when everything looked black and hopeless, something so wonderful had happened that it would make her happy to the end of her life.

"Well?" he said.

"I am heartbroken this should have happened—I can't understand it—I'll never forgive myself——"

Pierre Colin smiled seldom but now he smiled. "Don't

cry," he said, very gently, "don't cry. It isn't worth it. Don't cry over spilt milk. You are a fine girl, Angelina."

He had put his hand on her shoulder, given her a little pat and was gone. She still felt the warmth of his touch on her skin, her heart, her entire body, everywhere. "Don't cry, Angelina." He had called her Angelina as in the old days. He *remembered*. Miss Tyne having finished dressing her harp for the night, floated off on lovely pink clouds. She didn't know that Pierre Colin called every female harpist Angelina, just as he called every bearded musician Count Monterone and every piccolo player Maestro. He was a very busy man and he had to simplify his complicated life.

Mrs. Colin received him at the head of the little stairway, handed him a fresh handkerchief to dry his forehead and threw a coat over his shoulders.

"How's Sasha?" he asked.

"*Il est mort, Ponpon,*" she answered.

"Dead? Sasha?"

"Yes, Ponpon. It's very unfortunate. But don't excite yourself, you must be very tired."

"Dead-tired, yes, but I must talk to Certosa at once."

"You can't. He has locked himself in with Sybil Olivier and the lawyer."

"What for? To console her?"

"Console her? Don't you know the theatre? To make sure that she is not going to make any trouble about the accident. The police, you understand, the insurance, all the formalities. And no one in the theatre is to know what happened, not a word, not a breath until everybody has gone home. Certosa knows his business, he won't have a panic or mass hysteria during the performance."

Colin threw a furtive glance at his wife. She spoke more than she usually did, but her stolid face was calm and unmoved. Walking down the corridor towards his room,

he tried to organize his thoughts, but it was as if his brain had used up every drop of energy and his heart every emotion during the opera. He was empty, burned out, finished. He stopped abruptly.

"I am going to cancel all my performances, Margot," he said. "I am going to cancel my contracts. I don't want to conduct ever again, I've had enough."

"Yes, Ponpon, you are right. To-morrow we'll see to it. Now you need a hot shower."

"Never again, never again, do you hear me? Never again am I going through this hell, I won't conduct any more, Margot, I can't stand it any longer——"

"Certainly, Ponpon. Whatever you say, Ponpon. We'll talk it over to-morrow. Now I'll take you home and tuck you in and make an omelette for you, a very light omelette, with Maraschino——"

Their voices trailed off and the door closed behind them. The Met. gradually went to sleep, the heavy steel curtain came down like a parting wall between the stage and the auditorium. There were now only stragglers left in the house, which slowly emptied its tiers. The Boys had cheered and cheered; they were extremely happy with the outcome of the evening and they had done their honest best to make it a success. Fortified with a bottle of gin which they had acquired during the big intermission, they marched off, out on to Broadway and around the corner to the stage door to wait for Bob Marsh. In the gallery an enthusiastic Italian grocer had started a fight with two sceptical students from Columbia University. An old lady had lost her handbag and returned in a flurry to search for it. The ushers carried back the unsold programmes to the office and the old woman in the ladies' toilet-room counted up her harvest of tips in the little bowl.

The Kalish family, drunk with pride and success, pushed through the crowd on the street. A hoarse man called the numbers of the cars and the names of the elegant clientèle. "Mrs. Johnson's car, Mrs. Peter Johnson's car ready. Mrs. Johnson's car."

In her box Mrs. Johnson sat, very smart and upright, sleeping. Her fur cape was thrown round her shoulders, her white-gloved hands, resting on the red velvet rail of the box, held the opera glass and the fan, and she had a faint, mocking smile on her face. She looked very satisfied with the performance, because she had fallen asleep after the introduction to the last act, one of her favourite pieces and a little gem in Pierre Colin's repertoire.

The old usher opened the door of the box, coughing politely to wake her up. As she did not seem to hear him, he tiptoed up to her with the intention of respectfully pointing out to her that the opera was over. It was then that he discovered the waxlike stiffness of that faintly smiling face and sent word backstage, to Mr. Peter Johnson, that something had happened.

Robert Marsh was still bewildered with applause, the success, the congratulations, the sound of his own name, cheered and yelled at him from all tiers and balconies. The effect of the champagne had somewhat worn off during the strenuous task of dragging Bhakaroff through the third, and his exhausted Carmen through the last, act, but he still felt intoxicated and lightheaded. He had asked several people how Bhakaroff was feeling now and whether he had left for his boat or not, but no one seemed to know for sure. His dresser claimed to have seen Mr. Bhakaroff leaving the house with Miss Olivier and Slickum. Mike Stern, who poked his head into the room to say good-night, announced spitefully that the Old Man had got drunk in his dressing-room to forget his failure and Mike's triumph. Dr. Mayer,

whom Bob caught fluttering down the corridor like a bird, shrugged his shoulders but gave no answer. No one seemed to understand how utterly important it was for Bob to know whether Sybil at this moment was sailing off as another man's bride or whether she could still be found in the theatre, for a last word of farewell.

He dressed quickly and, after a moment's hesitation, he decided to go first to Bhakaroff's room, find out himself whether they had left or not and, if they were still there, to inquire about the great man's condition and offer his assistance. Yet, when he turned the corner of the narrow corridor, he was stopped by Slickum who stood in front of the door of his master's dressing-room. Bob's unreasonable heart gave a leap, for Slickum's presence meant most probably that Sybil too had not left yet.

"Mr. Bhakaroff still inside?"

"Yes sir, still inside."

"How's he feeling now?"

"Mist' Bakrow feelin' fine, I s'pose."

"May I go in and say good-bye to him? I would like to."

"No, sir, Mist' Marsh. Mist' Bakrow's aslepp, he's takin' a rest. I is s'posed to take care he ain't disturbed."

"I see——" Bob said. "Miss Olivier in there with him?"

"No sir."

"But she hasn't left yet, has she? I mean, have they both missed the boat?"

"I s'pose so, Mist' Marsh."

"Well, thanks, Slickum," Bob said and went off, whistling.

He did not go directly to the ladies' side but made a few cunning *détours*. Wherever he went, he was embraced by fast-talking Italian fellow-singers, kissed on both cheeks by faded female chorus members; there was a lot of shoulder-clapping and handshaking, congratulations and prophecies were showered upon him and even the older stage-hands looked at him with a new expression of curious respect.

So this is what they call success, he thought confusedly. He knew that he should have been happy, but he wasn't. As soon as he escaped from all his new admirers, he rushed to Sybil's dressing-room and arrived there out of breath. He knocked twice, but there was no answer. Timidly he tried the door, but it was locked. An old woman who passed by carrying a load of chorus costumes stopped curiously at his side. "Are you looking for Miss Olivier? She is upstairs in the office, I saw her go in with Mr Cartosa," she said to him. "Are you sure?" he asked. "And she hasn't left yet?"

"No, she hasn't. Dr. Mayer is in with them too," the old dresser reported. She waited for a moment or two, because she would have liked to know what Robert Marsh wanted from Miss Olivier. All the little people, all the dressers and hair-dressers, stage-hands and electricians, the whole anonymous crew had known that these two were in love with each other long before they had known it themselves. They had not much life of their own, all these little people backstage, but they shared with eager curiosity whatever glamour, romance and exciting adventures the lives of the singers had to offer.

What now? Bob thought, as he slowly crossed the empty stage and took the elevator to the street floor. Wait for Sybil? Just to see her off with another man? Or go home now and try to forget her as fast and as completely as possible? Before he could make up his mind he found himself once more embraced, kissed, patted and pummelled; it was Woollie who had waited for him downstairs. After the first outburst she tried to appear very calm and casual. "Not bad, my boy, not bad," she said pompously. "But don't let it go to your head. You are still a little *Patzzer*. Now we'll really start to go to work." She got up on her toes to turn up the collar of his coat, it was the only thing she could do for him. "You've got to buy a new coat, this one is too thin," she said; for this coat had been a cause of permanent worry to her—and Bob's winter coat was in pawn. She took

his arm and marched him through the stage entrance and out on to the street. Cheers, yells, whistling, not only from The Boys who were waiting outside but from the whole crowd which had collected there. It was a long time since Woollie had waded into a cheering crowd as if into a warm, pleasant bath. She carried her head very high and waved her fat little paws. Bob wriggled himself free from her grip, feeling rather ashamed. "You'll have to excuse me," he said uncomfortably, "I forgot something——"

Woollie caught hold of his coat just as he sneaked back into the entrance, "Stop!" she commanded. "You are not making a fool of yourself, my boy? You are not waiting for Miss Olivier?"

"The very idea——" Robert, who was a very poor liar, tried to lie.

"Don't do it," Woollie went on, "she'll have her hands full with her old man. He seems to make an awful fuss about his sprained ankle. They even say he got himself drunk and Mr. Cartosa locked him in, so that there should be no scandal during the performance. . . ."

"Look here, Woollie, that's just why I want to wait. Maybe Miss Olivier will need someone to assist her, help them get to the boat or something——"

"You sucker," she said. "You poor, poor, dumb sucker."

Bob decided to throw her to the wolves. "Boys," he called to his friends. "Take her with you but don't get her drunk. Go ahead to Nossler's. I'll be there very soon."

"To Nossler's? With all the boys? Well, maybe I have deserved a glass of beer," Woollie said coyly and was carried off in triumph by the elated cheer section from Carter and Carter. Right behind them, Mike Stern marched off, was received and kissed by the Kalish family and greeted with a few good-natured cheers. He was not surprised by his success. He had known all along that something like this was bound to happen. Neither was he arrogant, now that

he was on his way to wealth and fame. In passing, he slapped Robert's shoulder, called: "Hya, pal?" saluted nonchalantly to Mussolini and halted for a moment to give all his retainers a good look at himself. There came the skyrocketing moment when, for the first time in his life, he was asked to give his autograph. The girl who wanted it was cross-eyed, but that didn't matter. "Thank you, Mr. Stern," she said. "You are perfectly welcome," he answered, as if he had given autographs all his life.

"Let's go, my Rolls Royce is waiting on Seventh Avenue," he told the Kalish family. Olga took his arm, resolved never to let it go for the rest of her life, and after they had gone the street seemed quieter and emptier than before. Bob strolled back into the entrance, feeling a fool; yet he could not leave the Met., not as long as Sybil was still inside the old building. The glum-faced telephone operator was still there behind her glass partition. "Hello, handsome," he said. But instead of answering as usual: "Hello, stupid," she said: "Congratulations, Mr. Marsh." He turned to Mussolini who seemed to look grimmer than ever. "Has Bhakaroff left yet?" he asked as nonchalantly as he could manage.

"No," said the despot.

"Are you sure?"

Mussolini only shrugged his shoulders.

"And Miss Olivier?"

Mussolini shot a sharp glance at him. "She musta come soon," he said. Bob turned down his coat collar and even unbuttoned his coat, he felt very warm, there was still some champagne left in his blood. He went back to the street to get a breath of the moist air outside. A big, familiar-looking car had stopped in front of the stage entrance and a small hand beckoned to him from the window. He stepped up to it and recognized Mabel Carter, very white and fluffy, looking like a young swan with a long neck and curious eyes.

"Hello, Miss Mabel," he said.

"Hello, Bob."

"What are you doing here?"

"You might not notice it but I am the dove with the olive branch," she said. "My father sends his regards and would you care to have a little supper with us at the Waldorf? You do care, don't you, Bob?"

"Certainly I care, Miss Mable. But I have an appointment with some of the boys from the office."

"Chuck it, Bob. And don't Miss Mabel me. Why don't you say something?"

"What should I say?"

"Something nice. Thanks for the lovely flowers, for instance. Or did you throw them into the dustbin?"

"Oh, did *you* send me those violets? Thank you so much. I wondered how they ever got into my dressing-room."

"Didn't you read my lipstick letter?"

It dawned on Robert how those annoying, suspicious spots had got on to his costume. He wished Mabel Carter would go and leave him in peace just now.

"It was all one big muddle," he said with a trace of impatience in his voice.

"One big muddle, that's just what it is; everything is one big muddle, one's whole life, everything, everybody," Mabel burst out, to Robert's great consternation. "Now that you are going to be famous and everything could be so wonderful, you have changed. My, how you have changed, Bob! But it's no good you pretending you never cared for me, I know you did. Say that you did care, say that you still do, even if all the women are crazy about you because you are a tenor and when you make love to Carmen every girl in the theatre thinks you are making love to her."

Mabel paused because she had got everything tangled up. She took a deep breath and made a forward pass. "Or else why did you kiss me, Bob?" she asked.

It is true, Robert Marsh had kissed girls before; he even

remembered to have kissed Mabel Carter that time he had to escort her to her father's lawyer; or she had *made* him kiss her, or maybe *she* had kissed him. It had not been very clear then and it was entirely hazy now. He put his hand on the open car window and tried to be a gentleman.

"Look here, Miss Mabel," he said, "you are very, very lovely to look at and very young and as inquisitive as a little monkey. You wanted to know what it was like to flirt with a boy from your father's office and maybe I wanted to know whether the skies would fall down on me if I kissed the boss's daughter. Well, they didn't fall down and I will cherish that little memory to the end of my days. But don't put any nonsense into your little head, Mabel. We have nothing in common. You belong to one world and I belong to the other and there is no bridge between us. You are audience; I am—stage. You sit in your box and look pretty and you don't understand anything of our profession. Sometimes you listen for a few minutes and then you get bored or you think of other things, or you look at the people in other boxes so as to have something to gossip about and sometimes you like it and applaud and sometimes you don't, but you don't care one way or the other, because you are just audience. But for us behind the footlights, there exists nothing but the opera, the performance, the profession, and we work and sweat and are desperate and delirious. We are jealous and mean to one another, but we understand one another and we measure everything in life from the standpoint of the stage and we care for nothing else because the stage that's our life and our home and the only thing that really counts with us. And now, Miss Mabel, thanks for the invitation and for the flowers, for everything else—I have to go back to the theatre——"

And with this amazingly eloquent and articulate analysis the last whiff of champagne and drunken excitement evaporated from Robert's mind. He took off his hat, turned round and retreated soberly into the shelter of the stage entrance.

"What did he have to yell at you?" Peter Johnson Junior asked Mabel. He had just arrived in time to hear the last words and to see Marsh disappear.

"The stuck-up ass," was all Mabel answered. Peter opened the car and stepped in; "Home——" he told the chauffeur.

"I thought we are having a supper party at the Waldorf?" Mabel said. Peter put his arm around her shoulder. She wriggled a little but came to rest after a while. He contemplated how he was to break the bad news to her without a shock. "No, we don't," he said. "In fact, we are going to have a funeral. Granny is gone."

"But, Peter——"

"Yes, I know. It gets you in the pit of the stomach. But she was old and maybe she didn't mind so much, what do you think? She didn't quite fit in any more. I think if she could have had the choice, she would have preferred to pop off during a nice, juicy performance of Carmen rather than live through the liquidation of the firm and all that. You are not crying, Punk, are you?"

"No, not about Granny," Mabel sobbed with candour.

Peter put his arm a bit closer around her and she snuggled up to him.

He looked straight ahead and gave one deep sigh. He had never noticed before how young Mabel was, so very young all over, her hair, her skin, even to the blueish white of her eyes. The whole girl was shining, rippling, radiant with youth. He didn't think she used a lot of cold cream on her face either. He felt as if he had just begun to be grown-up.

"I thought that after the funeral and all that, I might go to Sun Valley during the Easter vacation for a bit of skiing," he said and this was the end of a very long and heavy chain of thought. "Care to come along?"

Mabel blew her nose. "Will there be snow at this time of the year?" she asked.

"Oodles of snow," Peter said.

"Okay," said Mabel.

Only ten minutes after she had left it, Madame returned to her room, but she felt as if she were coming home from a long and stormy journey; as if she had travelled very far and found that everything had changed during her absence. Her throat felt dry and smarted after the shock she had received. Miserably she looked at the disorder she had left behind; kneeling down she picked up all the pieces she had flung from her trunk and threw them back pell-mell. Petrushka, where are you? she whispered, for now her voice had gone completely and she listened with horror to the evil sound that emerged from her aching throat. The doll stared at her with stupidly round eyes and suddenly Madame was very angry with Petrushka. She hurled him across the room; he clattered to the floor, but did not break. Petrushka, had lived with Madame for many years and was used to hardship. When most of the things were back in the trunk and not another inch of space was left, she squeezed the lid down and sat on it to get it closed. Petrushka, the second act of Carmen and a piece of Aïda were left outside, and Madame worried about them while she sat on the trunk and tried to think. That's how people die, she thought. They are there in the first act and in the fourth act they are not there any more, and that's all there is to it. "People don't simple go off and die," she remembered having thought earlier that evening. Well, they do. What's all the excitement, then, about the voice and the singing, and the Press and the applause and the success? Where does it get you? In the end you are lying on a couch, stiff and alone and someone else is singing your part, just as good as you, and the audience is applauding, just as much as they applauded you. "It's not decent," she thought, "it not decent the way they treat dead

people in the theatre. Hide them in a locked room as if death were something to be ashamed of. All they think of is their confounded opera. The show must go on. Why must the show go on? What's so important about a show that it must go on? Who cares, who on earth cares whether the show goes on, but we who are in the show? Why can't a blind man stay at home and make the best of it? Why has he to crawl on to the stage and break his neck? Why have I to sing Carmen when I should be with my girl to take care that she doesn't swallow down a tube full of veronal? Why must I chase around the world and never have time to do the things I want to do? If I don't sing Carmen someone else will, some new star, some young singer. Aha, Katinka, that hurts, but let's think straight for once. Some day I'll be where Sasha is now. What will be left of me? Will they put on my gravestone: 'She was a good trooper, she kept on singing after her voice had gone?' Oh, enough of this philosophizing. You are what you are and you can't become something else just because an old friend dies with grease-paint on his face. Come to think of it, he was not old; he was younger than I am. In 1928, when we sang in Salzburg together for the first time, he was thirty-two; that means he is forty-three, and dead. Maybe I'll die next week, I am forty-five. (I am forty-five" Madame thought, making herself three years younger even in this moment of supreme candour between herself and herself).

"Supposing I die, who would care? No one, not even I myself. Yes, but there will be a baby, Katinka. I know, I know, there will be a baby, a sweet, warm, gurgling baby; they always smell of fresh apricots, and when you unbundle them they seem to be cooked in their own steam and when they are born they have tiny toes and fingers, complete with little pink nails. Maybe I could take two weeks' vacation when the baby is coming——"

It was at this point of her meditations that Madame left

the trunk, marched once more to the telephone and, with great zeal and enterprise, managed to get a call through to Mr. Charles Goris, Chief Manager of the Opera in San Francisco. It was almost midnight in New York but only dinner time on the coast and Charles had a bridge party in his house. There were hoarse, croaking minutes of haggling, explaining, threatening and imploring, and then Madame returned to her room, trying once more to get the refractory costume parts into the trunk. She was proud of herself because she had done the right thing, and felt very strong and capable of any task that lay before her. In spite of all this the trunk defeated her a second time. The lid clamped down on her neck just as she tried to push Petrushka into his bed. While she still struggled to get herself free, the door opened and admitted first a frail, tender scent, then an enormous bunch of forsythia and lastly Cyril Durham . . . trying to get the yellow branches through the door without breaking too many of them. He announced "Spring is here," pulled Madame out from under the lid, put the flowers into her arms, looked round, took Petrushka, Carmen and Aïda, folded them up, made three little manipulations with his hands, had everything packed, looked round again, asked: "Anything else to go in the coffin?" closed it, looked for keys, found none, smiled an appreciative and comprehending smile and sat down on the top of the piece of luggage, waiting for further things to happen.

Intently as Madame had thought of Katzerl during the last few minutes she had totally and unaccountably forgotten the very existence of her son-in-law. Now she felt greatly relieved that he had come and very angry that he hadn't come sooner.

"Why are you so late? I am not used to be kept waiting," she shouted at him. "Anything might have happened while you were dawdling about. I hate unpunctuality, hate it like sin."

Madame spoke the truth; she herself was the most unpunctual creature on earth and her life-long struggle against the inflexibility of clocks in general had implanted in her a strong dislike of unpunctuality.

"I had to have flowers for you, can't you see, darling, and I can't tell you what it means in this town when you want flowers after ten in the evening; every god-damned florist shop closed, uptown, downtown, Brooklyn and New Jersey. Aren't they nice, though? You do love flowers, don't you?"

"Not if they are stuck on wires and smell like a funeral before the cremation has started. But I like wild-flowers like these. Where did you get them?"

"Had a brainwave. Stole them from the toilet room at the Pierre. They have gorgeous flowers there. I left five dollars in the bowl, because I am a gentleman, darling."

"Don't call me darling," Madame said. She had to get him quickly into a condition fit for Katzerl's jealous perusal.

"No? What then? *Liebchen? Mon amour? Piccina?*"

"You are crazy?"

"Yes, about you."

"And drunk."

"Now that is a very unfriendly way of putting it. I had to have a Scotch-and-soda with the man who lent me his car, can't you see?"

"What man? What car? Katzerl is not in Boston."

"What has Boston to do with the car?"

Madame felt that one of those confusions was arising which occurred so frequently in her conversations with others.

"I thought you had taken to heart what I told you and that you therefore wanted to drive to Boston to-night and bring Katzerl her breakfast to-morrow morning," she said as clearly and sensibly as possible.

"Nonsense," Cyril replied cheerfully. "We are driving to Newark; we can easily make it in an hour."

"We?" Madame asked feebly. "Newark? Now? Why?"

"I've built such a lovely factory five miles out of Newark, all glass and steel, you will love it. I thought you might want to know what sort of a guy you are taking to San Francisco with you, and you don't know a man if you don't know his work."

Madame knew that she should be annoyed with all this irresponsible behaviour. The trouble was that she liked it and understood it and could have talked and behaved exactly like that under the same circumstances.

"It's a lovely night, the moon is shining, my factory will look like the palace of the Snow Queen—remember Andersen's fairy tale?—although it's a hundred per cent. up to date and practical. We could make a little *détour* and drive back across Washington Bridge, I'll tell you what an interesting child I was and you can sleep while I tell it. It would be much nicer for you than to fly off with a perfect stranger to-morrow, don't you see?"

Madame could see it all: the drive through the night, the moon, the building which might be crazy and yet efficient like its architect, the sweet fatigue on the way home, the closeness to each other, the first confidential words. Cyril was nice but Cyril was not Antony and Antony was a common thief and Madame, acquainted with every shade and hue, every joy and every pain of love, knew that driving like that with Cyril would only increase a hundred times her heartache for her spoiled and lost love. And, besides, Cyril was Katzerl's husband.

"Listen, Cyril," she said. "We are not going to Newark and we are not flying to San Francisco. If it matters only the tiniest little bit to you what I think of you, you will go with me to my hotel now and say good-night to Katzerl. I don't ask you to stay the night. All I'm asking you to do is to go into her room and say: "Good-night, Goopy." Will you do that for me?"

"No, why should I?"

"One of the reasons is that she is your wife. Another is

that you will feel very happy after you've done it. Don't tell me that you don't love her, because I wouldn't believe you. You say your factory is lovely; but it's just another house—that's nothing. You can take Katzerl and shape her and form her into anything you want—that's something. I'll help you if you want me to. You don't know her as well as I do. She is capable of doing something—something irreparable if you don't go back to her. It would ruin your life for ever."

Madame chose her words with great care, she was so intent on making herself clear that her grammar became almost correct. Cyril looked curiously into her blazing blue eyes under the crinkled and gilded eyelids. "You are a funny woman," he said, and for the first time there was a shade of seriousness in his voice. "Why do you insist on dragging me back into my marital bed? What is it to you whether or not I love my wife? Maybe I do. Maybe I don't and never will. I cannot tell it myself. That's why I left her, I have to find out . . . all by myself, where we stand. I have to find out what Goopy means to me. But I don't want to be pushed and hurried. If I feel like saying good-night to her I would do it and nobody would have to tell me. If I don't feel like it, I won't do it and nobody can make me do it."

Madame went towards the door while he spoke. "Let's go. It's late and I'm tired," she said. Cyril came trailing after her. Suddenly she had reached the end of her patience. "So that's it?" she said and stopped abruptly so that he found himself very close and face to face with her. "That's the whole song. You do what you like and you don't do what you don't like. What a hell the world would be if everyone were like that, selfish, irresponsible, cruel. Now I've had enough of it. I am a fool even to have talked to you, oh, what a fool I am. I am making all the sacrifices but you two don't move a finger; shall I tell you what I did for you and your God-forsaken marriage? I've cancelled Salome, yes, that's what I did. I'm not flying to San Francisco

to-morrow. Do you know what that means? It means, as much to me and to the San Francisco opera season as if one of your lovely steel and glass houses were to crash down—worse, as if you tore it down with your own hands. That's what I've done for you without even talking about it. And all you answer is that you can't say good-night if you don't feel like it and you seem to be even proud of it. There, take your flowers and leave me alone. I am going to Katzerl now to beg her to sue for a divorce. You are not the man I want for my—for my——”

Madame stopped abruptly. They had reached the staircase by now and Cyril had bent down to gather up the forsythias she had thrown away. His face was white when he got up again and a blue vein stood out on his forehead. “Well, go on, go on, I'm listening,” he said.

“Are you going back to Katzerl, yes or no?” she asked.

“No,” he answered.

Madame didn't have to think, for Madame was a genius. She did the right thing by instinct and she did it in masterly fashion. It took the fraction of a second and she had embarked on her Grand Scene.

“I forgot to tell you,” she said, very softly, “I am Katzerl's mother.”

Cyril stared at her as if he saw a ghost. “No,” he finally said.

Now that it was done and she had given birth to her confession, Madame began to smile, a gentle and dolorous smile. “Yes, Cyril,” she said, “I am Katzerl's mother—and a very bad mother at that. Whatever might be wrong with Katzerl—I am responsible for it. She has told you how unhappy she had been as a child, but she hasn't told you all of it. I remember her in her little school uniform among the other little girls. They all had mothers. She had nothing but a shameful lie. How lonely she must have been, how lonely I have left her all those years. And how hard it is for Goopy to lie, you don't know her as I do——”

"I do know her, she can't even tell anyone on the telephone that I am not at home. And you made her swindle and tell fibs and invent stories to cover up your tracks, to save you. Save you—from what?" Cyril asked. "Now I begin to understand her. Poor little fool. No wonder she doesn't trust anyone, no wonder she draws back into her shell every time I try to get close to her. She is afraid——"

"Yes, yes, she is afraid you might find out her secret—my secret. She is so loyal, she wouldn't give me away, even if she hated me. She hates me, Cyril, and I love her, believe me—but I don't deserve any better——"

"If she hates you, as she does, she must hate me too. Now I understand it all. Of course she doesn't believe anything I say and doesn't trust me and cannot live with me. You know why? Because you and I, we are made of the same material—cheap, irresponsible. A nice mess we have made of her life, you and I."

"But, Cyril, everything will be different from now on. Now that I have told you the truth, Katzerl will open up too, you'll see. I'll ask her to forgive me, I'd do anything to make up for the mistakes I've made. It is not too late yet, she is such a baby, such a blind little mouse, she hasn't opened her eyes yet——"

"What a rotten mother you were——"

"What a rotten husband you still are, my friend——"

Cyril stared at her with the greatest intensity. Madame, trembling with the triumph of her own performance, detected a tearlike glitter in his eyes. She too had worked herself into tears. This was better than Carmen, much better. . .

"It's against nature," he said. "I still can't believe it. You are a lioness and she is a little ground squirrel, digging, always digging. Yes, I begin to see it now. Sometimes the expression when she sings her little Lieder, my poor Goopy. It can't be easy for a little girl to grow up in your mighty shade. You've squashed her flat, you've pushed her out of

her little nest, you made her terribly, terribly unhappy when you burdened her with that lie that was much too heavy for her. How could you, how could you be so mean, so absolutely heartless towards Goopy?"

Madame thought that things were going a bit too far. "You must hear my side of the story too; some day I will tell you all about it," she said pleadingly. "My life has not been a bed of roses either——"

"I have a pretty good conception of your life, my friend. When you add it all up you must have had a lot of happy fun. And when it comes to the worst you have the satisfaction of making the supreme sacrifice; you cancel a performance, you give up Salome to save Katzerl's life. No sense of proportion whatsoever. How often have you sung Salome? How long have you been on the stage? And is it all still so wonderful to you? And all this old-fashioned, silly, ridiculous fear of letting the world know you have a grown-up child. All the heartbreak, yours and mine and Goopy's—for what? So that people shouldn't know that you were getting older? Of course they know. They say you are sixty. How old are you really? Seventy? Fifty? What does it matter?"

"I am forty-three," Madame cried, infuriated. "And I did not seem too old for you to want to go to San Francisco with me."

That broke the tension and made Cyril laugh. "No, and do you know why? Because you will be the same when you are eighty or a hundred, bless you, and I always wanted to have a friend like you."

"What are we going to do now?" Madame asked as they reached the ground floor and Mussolini's desk came in sight. Cyril took her elbow and propelled her down the passage.

"Now we are going to say good-night to Goopy. And if you will promise to get me eggs that are boiled for exactly four minutes, no more and no less, I might be round for breakfast too."

Madame took a deep breath and began at once to bloom and glow from within. At least fifty of her hundred wrinkles disappeared, her eyes brightened, her body straightened up, her gait became brisk and swinging again. She had looked sixty a few minutes ago. Now she became rejuvenated before Cyril's amused eyes and as they reached Mussolini's box she looked forty-five again. Her voice too had returned to its abode in the celebrated and spacious throat. There were even, God bless them, a few fans waiting outside the stage entrance, late as it was. On a wave of polyglot benevolence she sailed through the door.

"Guten Abend und viel Glück."

"Guten Abend, Madame."

"Au revoir, Pierre, mon ami. Bon soir, Madame Colin."

"Bon soir, Madame."

"Buona sera, Mussolini. A rivederci."

"Good-night, Don José. 'Till the next time."

"Good-night, Madame, and thanks."

Suddenly they were stopped by a breathless little man in a neat blue suit and with a hat in his fumbling hands. "Madame," he stuttered, "Madame Lanik——" As she knew Joe Forest only in his overalls she did not recognise him and it is very questionable whether she should have recognized him in any case.

"It's about the kid, my wife just 'phoned me, she is okay, Kitty, you remember Kitty, Madame? You gave her twenty dollars last time. The doctor says the operation was nothing at all; well, that's what they always say when it's over, but God Almighty, I almost went nuts. She is such a cute kid, Madame. If anything had happened to her—but my wife says there is nothing in the world to worry about now. She gave me a good scolding, women are so much better in such things than men, it's true, Madame, women can take it much better—and now I'm going to the hospital——"

And Joe was about to stumble off before Madame had

time to hand him another contribution for Kitty, her sixteenth godchild. She grabbed his sleeve and pulled him back. "Wait, wait," she said impulsively. "We have a car, we'll take you to the hospital. Please, don't thank me, it's really nothing——"

She climbed into the borrowed car and Joe installed himself into the rumble seat. Cyril tucked a rug around her which she kicked off at once.

"Katzerl will be waiting, but five minutes sooner or later makes no difference," she said happily. "It wasn't easy," she thought, "but it was worth it. If everything goes well I might still be able to fly to San Francisco the day after to-morrow and sing without any rehearsal. But maybe I better stay here another day, help them over the new beginning and give Katzerl a few hints how to treat her man. On the other hand, if they make it up to-night I would only disturb them to-morrow at breakfast. If they would make it up to-night, it would be the best thing all around if I took the morning 'plane after all and surprised Charles Goris. "Not even to herself did Madame admit that she had not cancelled Salome; she had only cancelled the first three rehearsals, but it appeared that no sacrifice would be necessary. "In the end I always get what I want," she thought. She looked from under her eyelashes at Cyril. "You know, I am afraid I like you very much," she said. He smiled at her and started the car. "I still can make men do what I want," Madame thought as she leaned back in the cushions and the car rounded the corner of Broadway and Fortieth Street. "

After the car had driven off, the street grew emptier and quieter. All the singers had left, all the fans had gone, only Robert Marsh was still waiting and Mussolini, reluctant and grumbling, obeyed orders and remained behind his desk.

"What's this?" Bob asked when a white ambulance car

came to a stop outside and two men with a stretcher entered.

"They are coming to take Mr. Bhakaroff out," the telephone operator said laconically. It gave Robert Marsh a jolt, because it meant that Bhakaroff was hurt much worse than anyone believed. Soon the two stretcher-bearers returned, carrying their stiff load under its white sheet. Bob flattened himself against the wall to let them pass, his heart pounding, his mind struggling to grasp the meaning of this silent, casual departure. Mussolini stood to attention, the cap trembling slightly in his knobby hand. Dr. Mayer was the only person to follow the stretcher-bearers out on to the street and to supervise their few expert manipulations. A moment later Slickum appeared, oddly enough, carrying his master's suitcase. The stretcher was shoved into the car and Slickum followed, the door closed, the two men took their seats, the ambulance started. Dr. Mayer, hat in hand, watched it disappear towards Seventh Avenue. Even after it had gone he remained like this, motionless, bare-headed, staring into nothingness.

"Is he dead?" Robert asked behind his shoulder.

"What? Yes, it's obvious, isn't it?" Dr. Mayer answered distractedly; he still tried to speak colloquially, but his German accent returned, stronger than ever.

"How come you are still hanging around?" he asked a second later. "You were not supposed to learn about it to-night. Nobody was supposed to know it. I am responsible for it, I am responsible for everything, I am made the goat as usual. God, am I tired? Black coffee, I need black coffee——"

"Where is Sybil—Miss Olivier, I mean," Bob asked.

"Sybil? She is still at the office. Very tactful arrangement, you understand? Keep her in the office and whisk Bhakaroff away meanwhile to save her from some of the horrid formalities which go with death. At the same time

you can be assured that Mr. Certosa will get her signature under any document he might think necessary."

"How is she? How does she take it?"

"She is wonderful. Believe me, Marsh, Sybil is a wonderful creature, brave, calm, collected, co-operative. She was the only one not to blame *me* for the accident."

"Blame you?"

"Naturally, whom else? It's I who tried to get the opera out of the old rut, It's I who had all the new ideas, it's I who believes that opera in 1939 can't be done exactly as it was done in 1890. It's I who got fired, I, the Jew, the alien, the reformer, the damn nuisance, kick him out, let him die, serves him right."

"I am sorry," Bob murmured. He was not much interested in Dr. Mayer's difficulties, although he felt a passing pity. "The man is shot to pieces," he thought. But Mayer had to talk to someone and he went on all the same, whether Bob wanted to hear it or not.

"He is dead and that's very sad and a rotten shame, for he was a great artist; but believe me, Marsh, one dead man more or less doesn't make much difference. Maybe I know death too well to be impressed by it. We are too well acquainted, death and I, and there was too much dying going on in my generation, it made us hard-boiled and thick-skinned or we wouldn't have survived it. Listen, I was a boy of seventeen when I went into the war, I was one of those crazy youngsters who sang when they made their first attack. There were not many of us who came back, but I did. I was in the war as long as it lasted except the three times I got wounded or gassed and went on leave. I've been through the retreat, through the famine, the street fights at home, the revolutions number one and two, I've been in a prison camp twice. Three of my best friends committed suicide. My little brother was killed on the street, my mother died of a broken heart. My sister was herded into a barrack and refused medical attention when she had her first baby. She's been

ill ever since and won't live long anyway. I'm sorry Bhakaroff is gone but I can't feel that it is important. We are living in an ant-heap and somebody bigger than we are seems to have stirred it up with his stick and then trampled on it with his boots. So now I get fired. I tell you something: I love the Met., I love this old junkyard, I love opera although no one knows better how helplessly antiquated it all is. The Met.—that was my last asylum—and now I get fired because a blind man has lost his hold on a piece of cardboard. I wish I were in his place, that's all I can say. Well, good-night, Marsh, you gave a very fine performance to-night. I need some black coffee——”

He stumbled off into the night. Mussolini, suddenly transformed into a gentleman in coat and bowler hat, looked after him. He made a circle on his forehead. “Nuts,” he said.

Sybil Olivier was the last to leave the theatre. All the legal talk in Mr. Certosa's office had taken her mind off the things that had happened, had blunted the blow and numbed her mind. But as she walked down the stairs, across the sleeping, big, empty stage and to her dressing-room to pick up her little suitcase, she felt very small and very lost and utterly lonely. She snapped shut the little case and went on, to the street floor, past Mussolini who had waited only for her to close the doors and go home. Outside the stage entrance Sybil paused for a moment, trying to collect her thoughts. It was cold outside and a thin fog had begun to spread along the street, creeping over the pavement and floating in small clouds round each street lamp. The block was very quiet now but Broadway and Seventh Avenue were two ceaseless rivers of noise and turbulent life, closing in on the dark island of the Met.

What now? Where to go from here? Sybil thought as she stood there, suddenly bereft of all purpose, all direction, all obligation. Home? Where is home? Sasha had been her home. She looked up and down the street for a taxi.

"Hello——" Robert Marsh said.

"Hello——" she said.

"I am sorry, Bunny. I am terribly sorry——"

"I know you are."

"Is there anything—I mean—could I do anything for you?"

"No, thanks. That is—if you could get me a taxi——"

"Sure. Wait here, will you?"

He waded through the low fog and Sybil looked after his disappearing figure. She was very sad and sore inside, but she could not help feeling that suddenly everything seemed easier and better and brighter just because Robert was there to get her a taxi. She did not know it, but she smiled as she stood there waiting for his return. It took a few minutes and then a taxi came rumbling along with Robert on the running board.

He opened the door for her and she gave him her hand, which he squeezed and kept in his for want of something to say. "Good-night, Bob," she said and now she knew herself that she smiled.

"May I take you home?" he said.

"No. Not to-night," she answered.

She took her hand out of his and got into the taxi.

It was not right that he should suddenly swim in a milky way of a million little stars and that his heart would be filled with happiness and strength, when he should have been sad.

She pulled up the window and laid her hand against it. Robert put his palm against the moist glass from the outside. It was as close to a kiss as it could be under the circumstances.

"I'll wait," he said. "We are young, we have time."

He did not know if she heard it. He hoped she did.

THE END

